considered to be of epidemic proportions in the United States, where 300,000 new cases are reported each year. Each new patient becomes a carrier for life. Acyclovir has generated great enthusiasm at Burroughs Wellcome, its developers, as a real advance in treating the disease. One worry, though, is that viruses may acquire resistance.

Herpes simplex virus (HSV) can infect any part of the skin or mucous membrane. HSV Type 1 cause the familiar "cold sore" blisters on the lip. Genital herpes, caused by HSV Type 2, is a more severe condition and causes painful blisters in the genital area. In the Dallas trial the drug will be applied as an ointment over skin areas where patients feel a tingling, burning or itching sensation (a "prodrome") suggesting that a blister is about to develop. Acyclovir will be compared with placebo cream containing no active agent. If the drug succeeds in reducing the period of recurrences to one or two days, it should not only reduce the period of pain for the patient, but also reduce the capacity for passing on the disease to others.

Because viruses are parasites of the normal systems of the cell they infect, antiviral drugs tend also to act against the host cell. There are few points at which the life processes of the virus can be properly differentiated from those of the host, but acyclovir acts specifically against herpesvirus through one such reaction (*Nature* 272, 583; 1978). It is phosphorylated by the herpes-specified enzyme thymidine kinase, so that the active triphosphate derivative is present in much greater quantities in infected than in uninfected cells. In a sense, the virus thereby invites its own destruction. It remains to be seen whether acyclovir will prove active against even the dormant form of the virus. Herpes infection is characterized by the way in which all outward evidence of the infection can disappear, but the virus persists undetected in certain nerve cells.

Acyclovir is being used as an ointment in the Dallas study, but later tests will include systemic (for example intravenous) injections which could increase the range of infections against which the drug can be used. Already acyclovir has proved active as an eye ointment against herpes simplex corneal ulcers, and less conclusively against viral pneumonia.

The US National Institutes of Health are to fund trials of intravenous acyclovir in newborn babies with neonatal herpes, in comparison with adenosine arabinoside (vidarabine), and in cases of herpes encephalitis, in comparison with the adenoside of adenosine monophosphate. Neonatal herpes is a herpes simplex infection contracted from the infected mother during passage through the birth canal — if the virus reaches the brain it can cause death. Herpes encephalitis is caused by reactivation of the virus in the brain.

Charles Wenz

European Earth sciences

Unity prevails

Strasbourg

Europe's Earth scientists may yet unite. A meeting on 13–16 April at the assembly of the Council of Europe saw the first public appearance of the European Union of Geosciences (EUG). At present, EUG consists of a founding committee and has the official status of a working party of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Its aim is to provide an organization which encourages the exchange of ideas and information across the more traditional subject barriers that separate geologists from the geochemists, geophysicists and oceanographers. To that end, membership is open to any geoscientist, but officials of EUG are to be nationals of the member countries of the Council of Europe.

At present, EUG is run by a founding committee under Professor C. J. Allègre of the University of Paris, and its formal statutes are to remain provisional until approved at a future meeting. EUG intends to hold a regular meeting in the spring in Strasbourg every other year; its interdisciplinary scope is to be complemented by more specific topical conferences to be held between the more general meetings. The concept and format of EUG owe a lot to the success of the American Geophysical Union and its big annual spring and fall meetings, which have almost become a must for many European researchers. However, the scope is to be wider insofar as it is to encompass all Earth scientists, not only those in the geophysical community. In this way, it hopes to avoid rivalries and misunderstandings with the European Geophysical Society, which caters for the same scientific community as the American Geophysical Union.

Although the European Science Foundation (ESF) did not play a major part in the organization of the Strasbourg meeting, it appears that ESF is prepared to help set up and support a small permanent office for EUG in Strasbourg. Is this the beginning of ESF taking a more active interest in the Earth sciences, an area hitherto neglected by its working parties?

The European Parliament building was made available by the Council of Europe for this first EUG meeting. Although organized at relatively short notice, it nevertheless managed to attract more than 600 participants and enough presentations to run a full four-day programme grouped in 16 different sessions.

The abstracts from the first meeting appeared as the first issue of an ambitious new publication called *Terra Cognita*. EUG hopes to develop this into a quarterly journal which should serve as a forum for scientific information on research projects and activities as well as to promote the discussion and exchange of ideas within the Earth sciences community. Konrad Guettler

Out on a limb

Brussels

Dutch Socialist Member of the European Parliament, Annie Krouwel-Vlam, is trying to whip up support for a European Community directive on common rules for organ transplants. She is surprised that there are no rules regulating relations between organ banks and facilitating access for would-be recipients of new parts. Such measures would implant a greater awareness of the benefits of the European Community in the breasts of its citizens, she asserted.

Her suggestion has been passed to the Community's organ banks and the European Commission. So international banking could soon take on a new meaning.

Jasper Becker

Interferon business

Trials ahead

Rotterdam

That interferon is big business can only have escaped the notice of those totally occupied for the past two years in preventing the pollution of space by small plastic tiles. That it continues to be big business was evident from the number of companies represented last week (19–24 April) at the interferon meeting organized by TNO, the Netherlands organization for applied scientific research.

Half of the British participants were from Beechams, Celltech, Fisons, ICI, G.D. Searle and Wellcome, with about the same proportion of commercial people among the West Germans. The large United States contingent included representatives of Cetus, Du Pont, Enzo Biochem, Electro Nucleonics, Genentech, Hoffman LaRoche, Hydron, Meloy, Sepetex, Schering and Shell. Not a slide went unphotographed nor a talk unrecorded by one or more commercially interested party.

Many of these companies already had a declared interest in interferon but some were new to the game. ICI let it be known that it has cloned an interferon gene from lymphoblastoid cells in collaboration with Dr E. de Maeyer's group at the Institut Curie in Orsay. ICI says that this is just an exercise in cloning, but with the setback in the fortunes of the company earlier in the year (*Nature* 12 March), there must be thoughts of trying to cash in on clones.

There is little doubt that the demand for highly purified interferon is growing, but the growth can be fitful. Wellcome, for example, recently claimed that supply had outstripped demand for its alpha-interferon (from white blood cells). That situation could easily be reversed if the current clinical trials of Wellcome's interferon show promise. The interim results, reported in Rotterdam, of several relatively large trials of a variety of different alpha-