Database activity in Japan

SIR—I found the recent article "New computer link for Japan" (*Nature* **344**, 92; 1990) misleading in its comparisons between Japanese and Western database activities.

First, as the article states, the manpower at the DNA Database of Japan (DDBJ) is certainly smaller than that at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) or GenBank, which are working with different entry-formats. In contrast, DDBJ did not invent its own third format; it adopted the GenBank format. This is an important contribution to worldwide database activities, as a third format would have introduced unnecessary problems among users.

Second, the lack of IBM-compatible computers in Japan does not cause serious problems in building databanks. In JIPID, we are accepting sequence files created on IBM-incompatible NEC personal computers. The problem of converting the software 'authorin' can only be a temporary situation. The question is not what is the standard but whether one is available.

Third, the article says that the DDBJ does not have the capability to cope with the massive amount of data expected to arise from the Human Genome project. This is probably true. However, it is also true of GenBank and EMBL, in terms of today's facilities and technology. An underlying assumption of the human genome project is that it will be able to take advantage of — or even itself to stimulate or generate — the technical advances that it will require. It is therefore misleading to suggest that only the DDBJ faces such problems.

Readers may derive from the article negative impressions of the contributions of Japanese groups to worldwide database activities. In the case of amino-acid sequences of proteins, JIPID (Japan) has formed an international collaboration with NBRF (USA) and MIPS (FRG) called PIR-International, which has adopted a common data-entry format. Journal scanning is shared among the three databases according to their geographical areas; a similar collaboration exists in the field of nucleic acid sequences among GenBank, EMBL and DDBJ. For example, JIPID collects protein sequences published mainly in Asia and Oceania. The number of journals scanned in JIPID is 74 out of a total of 162 journals covered by PIR-International. Sequence data entered in JIPID amount to 20 per cent of PIR-International. Besides this protein database, JIPID works on developments of specific genome databases, such as bacteriophage T4, *Escherichia coli* and rice. Variant and enzyme databases are also being developed for molecular biology and biotechnology.

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Overseas voters

SIR—Many recent leading articles in *Nature* have drawn attention to the shortage of funding for science in Britain, particularly in the university sector, and concern has been expressed at the number of British scientists leaving the country to work in conditions more conducive to their scientific and career goals. British scientists living abroad may therefore be interested to know that anyone who has left the country since 11 October 1970 is now entitled to vote in UK and European parliamentary elections. It is no longer necessary to declare an intention to return to the United Kingdom.

Overseas electors can vote in the constituency in which they or their family were registered before leaving the United Kingdom, provided they complete an application form (available from their nearest diplomatic or consular post) before 10 October 1990.

As well as having a say in the democratic process at election times, British scientists abroad will thus have a Member of Parliament whom they can lobby on any relevant matter. I hope that all who are concerned for the future of science in Britain will welcome this chance to vote for the political party most likely to provide appropriate funding for basic research in the universities and elsewhere. Such a change might even attract back some of the talent currently lost to the nation.

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Genome research

SIR—Your Australian correspondent, Tania Ewing, in a recent News article on "Preserving the present" (*Nature* **345**, 465; 1990), has misrepresented my views and the attitude of the Australian government to the collection of genetic resources and strategic genome research.

The Gene Library is being established to preserve and analyse DNA from a broad spectrum of species from the Australasian region, with particular focus on those that are rare, threatened or have unusual evolutionary or biochemical features. While we have not as yet received direct funding from government sources, we have not voiced complaints, and there is increasing interest from this sector. Indeed, collection of samples for the library has recently been made a condition of permits to take wildlife issued by the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service. We have also received an enthusiastic response from museums, herbaria, other wildlife agencies and research laboratories around Australia, through which we have access to their large existing collection of biological material.

The quotation ascribed to me that the Australian government "can't see the benefit of . . . sequencing key genomes" and the imputation of complaint are totally inaccurate. The Australian government, via the Department of Industry, Technology and Commerce (DITAC) and other agencies, is very much interested in and supportive of strategic genome research. Indeed, DITAC has established an *ad hoc* committee, of which I am currently a member, to promote and coordinate such research with, in all likelihood, additional directed funding. The suggestion that the Australian government is unaware of or unresponsive to the importance of these areas is the opposite of the true situation.

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EB research grants

SIR—Epidermolysis bullosa (EB) is a relatively rare, but frequently severe and sometimes lethal, condition which is inherited in various forms and causes blistering to the skin and internal body linings together with other complications. DEBRA is the national charity working to fund research into EB and support children and adults with the condition.

Research work is in progress at a number of centres into EB and, so far, an involvement of type VII collagen and a proteoglycan has been shown. DEBRA wishes to increase the volume of good quality research which it funds and welcomes research grant applications from workers who can bring an innovative approach to the study.

Those interested should contact me at the address below (telephone: 0344 771961), for a list of publications on the subject and a grant application form. Grant applications will be assessed by a specialist medical and scientific panel and will be competitive.

JOHN DART
(Director)
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