

AIDS chief promises a shift towards basic research . . .

Yokohama. The United States will reorientate its fight against AIDS to encourage more broad-based basic research, according to the head of the US AIDS research effort, outlining the new policy at the 10th International AIDS conference in Yokohama last week.

William E. Paul, director of the Office of AIDS Research at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), was appointed to the post six months ago after having worked for several years at NIH as an immunologist (see *Nature* 367, 587; 1994).

Paul said that it is "time to chart a new course for the future, avoiding the twin perils of an unreflective allegiance to the status quo and an impulsive acceptance of easy answers and solutions". He reaffirmed the NIH's continued commitment to clinical research, which receives a very large proportion of the total NIH AIDS research budget.

But he said that this research will be restructured to make it "more complete, coherent and cost-effective". And he called on the pharmaceutical industry to shoulder more of the costs of large phase-three clinical trials.

Echoing views recently expressed by Bernard Fields of Harvard Medical School (see *Nature* 369, 95; 1994), Paul described basic research as "the engine that will drive the entire AIDS research enterprise forward". In particular, he said that the current inadequacy of treatments for HIV infection were due to "wide gaps in our understanding" of the pathogenesis both of HIV disease and of the virus itself.

"A vigorous programme of creative investigator-initiated work is essential", said Paul, pledging to increase the resources available for support of such work. "I will

use all my powers to persuade a broader pool of basic scientists to join us in this effort."

At the same time, Paul warned that the basic research effort should not be overmanaged. Research administrators need to remember that breakthroughs would come from insights that cannot be planned. "Command science is no more likely to succeed than command economics."

NIH's drug development would also be reorientated, he said, to put "special emphasis" on therapies based on new molecular targets that will require greater understanding of the virus.

Paul said that agents that target the virus itself, such as the drug AZT, have been of limited success in treatment of HIV infection. A broader approach would therefore be adopted to develop new agents that intervene in the immunopathogenesis of the disease as well as to find new ways, such as gene therapy, to attack the virus itself.

Paul emphasized his office's commitment to vaccine development, despite the recent setback when the NIH had withheld approval of phase-three trials of two gp120-based candidate vaccines. But large-scale testing would proceed only when reliable scientific evidence suggested a "reasonable degree of promise".

In another reflection of the NIH's increased commitment to basic research, he said that in order to provide insight into vaccine development, support will be increased for studies of immunological resistance to infection with HIV and related lentiviruses. One such example he quoted was the Nairobi Sex Workers Study, which is examining a group of women who, despite repeated exposure to HIV, have resisted infection. **David Swinbanks**

. . . as Japanese taunt comes under attack

Yokohama. It is not only Japanese politicians who are capable of making public statements that upset the outside world. Shortly after the opening of the 10th International Conference on AIDS, Yuichi Shiokawa, the head of the conference organizing committee, came under fire for blaming the spread of AIDS in Japan on the "Americanization" of Japanese sexual morality.

Shiokawa had originally made the remark at a press conference held at the Ministry of Health and Welfare last month. At a further press conference after last week's opening ceremony, he was asked to explain what he had meant. Shiokawa said he meant that the "sexual behaviour of the Japanese has become more open and free than the traditional

one-to-one relationship".

Participants at the conference were upset by Shiokawa's remark, not only for its linking of AIDS to sexual morality — or the fact that it is questionable whether Japanese sexual behaviour has ever been traditionally one-to-one — but because the majority of AIDS cases in Japan have been caused by the use of contaminated blood products.

Shiokawa served on a government AIDS committee in 1983 that has recently been under attack for its failure at the time to allow the rapid introduction of heat-treated blood products (see *Nature* 367, 584; 1994). As a result of the delay, thousands of Japanese haemophiliacs were infected with HIV, and they remain the majority of Japan's AIDS cases. □

Work on telescope to continue in Chile as options are viewed

Munich. The council of the European Southern Observatory (ESO) last week agreed to continue construction work on the DM500-million (US\$330 million) Very Large Telescope (VLT), even though a dispute over the site of the telescope on the top of Mount Paranal has not yet been fully resolved (see *Nature* 368, 676; 1994).

At an extraordinary meeting held in Munich, the council agreed that the major mechanical components of the first VLT 8.2-metre unit telescope (there will be four such units in all) will be shipped to Chile later this year, enabling the project to remain on schedule for operation in 2000.

But, as guarantees of the long-term security of ESO's access to the site in northern Chile have still not been assured, the council also decided to continue its investigations of an alternative site in Namibia, in southern Africa, in case negotiations with the Chilean government fail.

Mount Paranal has already been levelled and foundations are being laid in preparation for the construction of the VLT, which will be the world's largest optical telescope. But the plans came under threat two years ago when a local family disputed ownership of the site (see *Nature* 368, 676; 1994).

ESO argues that it was granted immunity from local laws by an agreement with the Chilean government signed in 1963. Chilean officials say they accept ESO's general assessment, but are insisting on a formal amendment to the original agreement to cover the situation at Paranal.

The detailed wording of the proposed amendment is proving difficult to negotiate, but ESO's director, Riccardo Giacconi, says he is "very optimistic" that this can be rapidly sorted out.

Giacconi says that he is encouraged by his successful negotiation of resolutions to other disputes that have dogged ESO's activities in Chile for several years, including greater viewing times offered to Chilean astronomers at all ESO's telescopes in Chile.

But Giacconi says that it is "only pragmatic" to consider other options. ESO is now studying a site in Namibia on the flat top of the Gamsberg mountain, which is at present owned by Germany's Max Planck Society. Gamsberg was originally considered as a possible site for the VLT but Mount Paranal was seen as offering better overall viewing conditions.

Last month ESO started monitoring the viewing conditions in Namibia in case the site is needed as a fallback. But Giacconi hopes that ESO can stay in Chile. "It would be preposterous for science if we were forced to build the VLT at what is not the best possible site," he says. **Allison Abbott**