US accused of 'cover-up' in defence of Gallo claims

Paris. The US administration engaged in a massive 'cover-up' during the 1980s to defend the claims of Robert Gallo of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that he discovered the AIDS virus used to develop the US HIV test, according to the draft report of a three-year investigation into the affair by staff members of the US Congress.

The report was prepared for John Dingell (Democrat, Michigan), who chaired the House of Representatives subcommittee that oversees NIH until the Republican majority took control of Congress last month. This changeover means that the draft report is unlikely to be released as an official subcommittee report. The Republicans have new concerns, and the Gallo affair is said not to be one of them.

The report contains a detailed study of allegations that Gallo committed scientific misconduct, and an investigation of the 'institutional response' to the HIV blood-test patent dispute. The United States and France brought about a ceasefire in this dispute in 1987 by agreeing to a settlement under which Gallo and Luc Montagnier of the Institut Pasteur were credited as being the 'co-discoverers' of the virus, and royalties from the sales of the test were shared among the US Department of Health and Social Services (HHS), the Institut Pasteur and the World AIDS Foundation (see *Nature* 326; 584; 1987).

But the report says that this settlement "barely managed to paper over the glaring unresolved issues". Rather, it was the culmination of a cover-up where "political and international reputational [sic] imperatives" at HHS "assumed pre-eminence over scientific integrity", while defending Gallo's claims became "tantamount to defending the US government itself".

Last summer, the United States agreed to

give the Institut Pasteur a greater share of the royalties, and Harold Varmus, the director of NIH, acknowledged that "scientists at NIH used a virus provided to them by Institut Pasteur to invent the American test kit" (see *Nature* 369, 693; 1994).

In contrast, the report claims that the HHS's response during the mid-1980s to allegations by scientists at the Institut Pasteur that Gallo had used their virus to develop the US AIDS test was intended "to defend, at all costs and irrespective of the evidence, the claims of Gallo *et al.*"

HHS carried out a "parody" of an investigation, the report alleges, seeking not the truth but to "create an official record" to support Gallo. In particular, the report criticizes an HHS investigation carried out by Peter Fischinger, one of Gallo's superiors, which, it says, relied exclusively on evidence from Gallo. "Contrary facts or evidence were neither sought nor examined."

The report also alleges that Bernardine Healy, the former director of NIH, "did everything she could to protect her superstar senior scientist" and "effectively demolished" the agency's Office of Scientific Integrity (OSI) (Suzanne Hadley, who left the OSI in 1991, became the principal staff member responsible for the investigation by the Dingell subcommittee, and is the main author of the draft report.)

The appointment of Varmus in 1993 ended "the atmosphere of overt protection" of Gallo, says the report. But it also criticizes Varmus for failing to pass on evidence "demonstrating probable misconduct" to the appropriate disciplinary body, the Surgeon General's Board of Enquiry.

Gallo's attorney Joseph Onck dismissed the report on Monday as an "unofficial document", and described its contents as meaningless.

Declan Butler

UK firms buy into drug design skills of US start-ups

London. Two British companies have taken advantage of the relatively low price of US biotechnology shares to acquire west-coast companies that will help their plans to use advanced computing techniques to design new drugs.

Last week, the pharmaceutical company Glaxo plc, fresh from its \$9.4-billion (US\$15-billion) bid for its rival Wellcome plc which would create the world's largest drugs company, announced that it had agreed to purchase Affymax, a company specializing in so-called 'combinatorial chemistry', for the sum of \$533 million.

A week earlier, in a smaller but also potentially significant deal, Oxford Molecular, a company specializing in computer-aided molecular design, which last year purchased the US company IntelliGenetics, announced that it had agreed to buy CAChe Scientific Inc. of Beaverton, Oregon.

Both moves indicate keen interest on the part of the British companies in becoming key players in the rapidly expanding use by pharmaceutical researchers of computer-designed molecules, rather than those produced through chemical experimentation, as the basis of a new generation of drugs.

Among the drug-discovery technologies developed by Affymax is one that uses silicon wafer coated with human genetic material — known as DNA chips — to analyse nucleotide sequences. This technique, which can potentially be used to screen for possible mutations of disease genes, has been commercialized by Affymetrix, a subsidiary company in which Affymax has a 65 per cent share.

Affymetrix scientists last year described as one of their goals the representation of a 10 kilobase gene as an array of 10,000 overlapping oligonucleotides on a chip, and thus as a means of the identification of mutants in a single pass (*Nature* 364, 556; 1994). The authors were then working with 10^5 synthesis sites per cm^2 , but were expecting a 10-fold improvement to be feasible.

Oxford Molecular's planned acquisition of CAChe will be discussed at a meeting of the company's shareholders next week. The company is based at the science park of the University of Oxford, which is also one of its main shareholders. It operates primarily through contracting out research to university-based researchers.

According to the company's chief executive officer, Tony Marchington, the purchase of CAChe, whose present owners are Sony of Japan and Tektronix of Oregon (both of whom will become major stakeholders in Oxford Molecular), will make the Oxford company Japan's largest supplier of molecular modelling software

Klug to take over at Royal Society

London. **Sir Aaron Klug (right), director of the UK Medical Research Council's Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB), has been nominated as the next president of the Royal Society, to succeed his fellow Cambridge academic, Sir Michael Atiyah, next November.**

Klug is widely known for his work on crystallographic electron microscopy and the structure of biologically significant molecules, for which he was awarded the Nobel prize for chem-

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istry in 1982. Like his predecessor, he will hold the Royal Society post for five years.

Klug has also been a strong proponent of the need to protect basic science from excessive government influence. Two years ago, his stout defence of MRC laboratories such as the LMB helped to persuade the government to distance itself from proposals that all

such laboratories should be separated from the councils that finance them (see *Nature* 360, 614; 1994).