

BIOEXPO 86

REACHING TOWARD THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE

BOSTON, Mass.—When a state governor opens a conference on biotechnology, it is not so important what the official says, but that he is there in the first place. Such was the case when this state's Gov. Michael S. Dukakis told some 200 BioExpo 86 attendees that biotechnology can be of enormous benefit if it is "properly done, sensibly regulated, and with plenty of good will."

The Democrat lamented that he does not perceive a national focus on R&D funding, such as exists in countries like Japan. He suggested, however, that the states themselves have emerged as catalysts, with Massachusetts's Center of Excellence for Biotechnology in Worcester being an example. Dukakis concluded by asking his audience to suggest what state legislators can do to foster biotechnology. "Sometimes," he acknowledged, "that may mean getting out of the way."

U.S. Healthcare Trends

During the conference itself, Ian R. Ferrier, president of the consulting firm of Bogart Delafield Ferrier (East Hanover, NJ), offered some insights into the future of healthcare in America. Ferrier pointed out that healthcare expenditure increased by more than 3 percent every year between 1958 and 1982, inflation corrected. The portion of the Gross National Product (GNP) spent on healthcare had risen to 11 percent last year, up 4.8 percent from the 1950s. Because elderly people spend proportionately more on healthcare, these increases should continue, paralleling the "graying of America." In fact, Ferrier stated, on average a person uses 25 percent of his or her lifetime's healthcare services during the last year of life.

Federal healthcare containment programs—including Diagnosis Related Groupings, Prospective Payment Programs, Health Maintenance Organizations, and Preferred Provider Organizations—have been instituted to cut costs. Still, Ferrier predicted that healthcare expenditure will reach or exceed 14.5 percent of GNP by 1995.

Patients are becoming more involved in their own diagnosis and treatment of medical ailments, he noted, with over-the-counter fertility testing representing just one such market. Healthcare services are "flowing down" from the hospital to the physician's office and even the home. For example, pharmacists in

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Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis showed his support for biotechnology by making the keynote address to open BioExpo 86.

Broward County, Florida, are now allowed to prescribe a limited number of medicines. These forces direct diagnostics toward rapid, accurate, easy-to-use, stable, clearly readable, and cost-effective kits. The trend is away from tests that must be analyzed at the clinical laboratory and require numerous reagent steps. Solid-phase antibody technologies, DNA probes, and biosensors all may fit this bill.

Another glimpse into the future of American healthcare was provided by Zsolt Harsanyi, president of Porton International (Washington, D.C.). He noted that cost-containment and technological advances are leading toward an emphasis on prognostics—that is, the detection of predisposition or tendency to a particular disease. A person's age, sex, nutritional state, weight, concurrent disease, occupation, geographic location, and lifestyle all have a certain predictive value. In addition, demonstrated genetic susceptibility to a disease could be used as a warning to alter a person's lifestyle and minimize risk. Harsanyi stated that Porton has identified over 200 biological markers that can serve as prognostics for various conditions.

"There are a lot of social problems that can arise from this," he admitted, "but there are pressures to determine risk." In the case of Huntington's chorea, for example, a new DNA probe-based test can tell a person with a family history of the condition whether he will indeed develop it. But with no treatment yet available, only about half these people choose to find out.

A few "prognostics" companies have already formed. One such firm in which Harsanyi has been involved

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is Focus Technologies (Washington, D.C.), which will target group health insurance holders as it uses individual testing to predict risks.

Biotechnology Awards

The BioExpo meeting was marked—some would say enlivened—by its attempt to recognize outstanding achievement in the field of biotechnology. Genentech (South San Francisco, CA) won the award for technological achievement for its human growth hormone; the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment won the prize for outstanding technology service; and Robert C. Gallo of the National Institutes of Health and co-inventors Mikulas Popovic and Mangalasseril G. Sarngadharan won in the outstanding invention category for their work in identifying and growing the AIDS virus.

The Gallo award, however, caused some problems. The Institut Pasteur (Paris) is suing the U.S. government, claiming misuse by Gallo's group of virus samples provided by Pasteur for research purposes only. Coincidentally, the Cahners Exposition Group had been talking to Pasteur about sponsoring BioExpo; perhaps because of the Gallo award, Pasteur eventually decided not to participate. Unfortunately, Cahners had already described Pasteur as sponsor in some of its promotional literature. This error resulted in a variety of apologetic memoranda to conferees.

Attendance at the meeting fell short of expectation. Next year's version, reportedly, will be folded into Interphex—USA, to be held during April in New York.

—Arthur Klausner