first is clinical. Jewish patients with a family history of breast or ovarian cancer are currently those most likely to undergo DNA tests, because of the likelihood that a predisposing mutation in the family may be easily identified. However, in families where one mutation is already known to be inherited, there is a risk that if only this mutation is excluded, the 1 in 100 individuals who by chance might be expected to carry the other predisposing mutation would be falsely reassured. As the tests are easy to perform, Ashkenazi family members should be analysed specifically to exclude both mutations. Some families may not be aware of an Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, in which case an individual from any family which has one of the characteristic mutations (185delAG in *BRCA1* or 6174delT in *BRCA2*) should be tested for the other.

The second point concerns the possibility of an interaction between the two mutations in the same individual. No conclusions can be derived from the single case reported here: although this patient developed both breast and ovarian cancer, neither occured when the patient was young. Evidence for an interaction might possibly be sought either by analysis of the ages and types of cancer that occur in children of parents with both mutations, or a large scale study to determine whether double heterozygotes occur more commonly among Ashkenazi cancer patients than would be expected from the frequency of each alone.

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Conference consternation

Sir — A recent item in *Touching Base* (October 1996, page 127) addresses certain aspects of the International Congress of Human Genetics in Rio de Janeiro this August, complaining on behalf of the scientists present about organisation, transportation, "random" violence, and attendance. Each of these points merits consideration.

The fault attributed to organisation had a different cause: developed countries were frugal in support for the congress, and this naturally caused inconvenience to the participants, but even more to the organisers, who obtained modest funds after some invited speakers had withdrawn. Transportation alludes to the journey between tourist hotels and the congress centre, a characteristic of many large cities fortunate enough to have comfortable buses and congenial passengers. Violence is directed against the relatively rich who are unfamiliar with the milieu, and the object is not terrorism but robbery. This is no more "random" for thieves in Rio than for Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest. The author is obviously not a statistician, economist or philosopher.

Attendance is a less trivial concern. It has become customary for national and continental societies to merge their annual meetings with international ones if the venue coincides. The consequence of this is obvious: any congress in Brazil will have 5,000 fewer attendees from North America than a congress in Washington. The same principle guarantees that any meeting in Europe will have at least 2,000 fewer participants than Washington. The International Genetics Congress in Birmingham two years ago was disappointingly small but *Nature Genetics* did not propose that Europe be dismissed for future congresses. If numbers are the goal, international congresses will alternate between San Francisco and Washington for the next generation.

Before Americans congratulate themselves, let them look ahead. Phillip Abelson recently drew attention in *Science* to the fact that per capita expenditure on research is twice as great in Japan as in the U.S. It does not take much imagination to foresee that the next century will celebrate the dominance of Asian science. Americans who may now relish their supremacy may regret their insularity when international congresses oscillate between Tokyo and Beijing (since the "eugenic" sterilisation law that is now a barrier to responsible congresses in the People's Republic of China will not survive open discussion). If a congress is international, it must sometimes take place in countries where the customs, economy, security or transportation do not conform to the norms of another country. Those who find this unacceptable are wise to stay at home.

Any problems with the international congress in Rio pall into insignificance by comparison with the proposed International Congress of Genetics in Beijing in 1998, where the enforced sterilisation law is indistinguishable from the Nazi laws. The UK Genetical Society never objected to any previous distortion of genetics by sterilisation laws in the US or Germany, or by Lyssenkoism in the USSR, and so was under moral obligation to do something. Its Committee has responded appropriately by a resolution that this law should "bar the People's Republic of China from hosting the Congress in Beijing". At its Business Meeting in October, the American Society of Human Genetics reiterated its commitment to nondirective counseling, registered opposition to coercive measures based on real or imaginary genetic difference, and set up a committee to summarise the bitter lesson of eugenics movements in this century. *Nature Genetics* has reported similar actions by other societies of human genetics and the International Congress. The voice of the Genetics Society of America, which is intimately involved with the Congress in Beijing, has as usual yet to be heard.

The tension between internationalism and insularity is not limited to congresses of human genetics.

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The author was the President of the Executive Committee of the Rio meeting—ED.