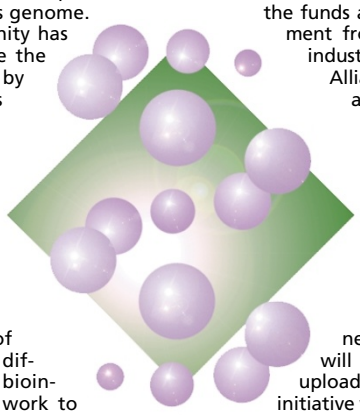
TOUCHING**base**

Ambitious *Arabidopsis* plans

In December 2000, an international cooperative effort by the *Arabidopsis thaliana* research community led to the publication of the complete sequence of the plant's genome. Building on this accomplishment, the community has now announced a new mission: to determine the function of each of the plant's 25,000 genes by the year 2010. A detailed plan of action was laid out in a report released last month by the Multinational *Arabidopsis* Steering Committee, a group representing 11 countries. The proposed objectives include the development of genetic toolkits for the research community (such as sets of sequenced mutants, collections of transgenic lines, and plant artificial chromosomes); the implementation of whole-systems approaches to identify gene function (such as the global analysis of mRNA expression and protein profiles under different conditions); and the promotion of new bioinformatics tools. The steering committee will work to ensure international cooperation and coordination of efforts. The complete report can be viewed at http://www.nsf.gov/pubsys/ods/getpub.cfm?bio0202.



Tobacco settlement funds cancer research

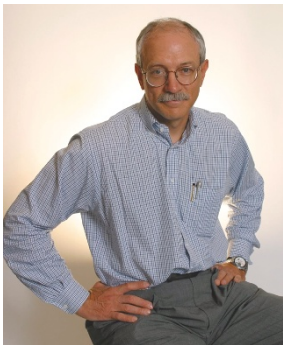
Six cancer institutes in Pennsylvania are developing a bioinformatics consortium for cancer research using $5.5 million from the funds awarded to the state as its share of the settlement from the national lawsuit against the tobacco industry. The group, called the Pennsylvania Cancer Alliance, will develop a virtual repository of serum and tissue samples characterized by genomic and proteomic approaches and linked to clinical information. Once up and running, the resource will be made available to researchers in Pennsylvania. The immediate task, according to Ronald B. Herberman, principal investigator of the consortium and director of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, will be to agree on an initial set of biomarkers for the analyses. He expects that within the next 6–12 months the bioinformatics structure will be in place for the participating centers to upload and share their data. One unique aspect of the initiative will be the tight linkage of molecular with clinical data; patients will be followed up, in particular with respect to their response to treatment, and clinical information updated on a regular basis. Herberman credits former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge, who now heads the Office of Homeland Security, for his decision to use 19% of Pennsylvania's tobacco settlement money for biomedical research.

BRCA1 patent opposition

This month, genetic institutes all over Europe will be preparing their cases in opposition to the third patent on *BRCA1* that the European Patent Office (EPO) has granted to Myriad Genetics (Salt Lake City). The patents, which Myriad won in 2001, give the US company control over testing for mutations in *BRCA1*, a gene strongly linked to breast and ovarian cancer. Since Myriad's discovery of the gene in 1994, many European labs have been developing and conducting their own tests, which they say are cheaper than the Myriad test, and have continued to do so despite the European patents. They have also been mounting a strong campaign to get the EPO to revoke the patents. Gene-testing labs and health and research ministers in several countries, including France, the Netherlands and Belgium, have already filed motions against two *BRCA1* patents, and by the end of the month, will do the same against the third (in the European system, opposition to a patent can be filed up to nine months after it is granted by the EPO). "Each time the number of supporting geneticists' organizations has been growing," says Dicky Halley, a geneticist at Erasmus University of Rotterdam. At issue, Halley says, is the firm's attempt to control diagnostics. "As I understand it, the way Myriad Genetics operates in the US is to grant licenses for testing a fixed set of known mutations and to demand that any further analyses be done by Myriad," says Halley. "A monopoly on genetic testing is not in the interest of the patient." At this year's meeting in May, the European Society of Human Genetics issued a statement on the need for the EPO to review its policies on gene patents, and in particular the "current tendency to accept patent claims that are relatively early in the R&D process and very broad in scope." So far, gene patents have had a much smoother ride in the US, but there are signs that the debate might be spilling across the Atlantic. In March of this year, Representatives Lynn Rivers (a Democrat) and Dave Weldon (a Republican) introduced the Genomic Research and Diagnostic Accessibility Act of 2002, which would exempt genetic diagnostic tests from the full protection of gene patents. Both the Association of American Medical Colleges and the American College of Medical Genetics have expressed support for the legislation.

Rolling stone lands at Jackson Lab

The Jackson Laboratory, the world's largest mammalian genetic research facility, has finally found a new director: Richard Woychik. The appointment, which will be made official at the laboratory's annual meeting on 17 August, comes almost three years after current director Ken Paigen announced his decision to step down. Paigen, who took his post in 1989, guided the laboratory through a major reconstruction after a fire in the production facility decimated the mouse stocks, and then led it into the genomics and bioinformatics age. With Paigen at the helm, The Jackson Lab has emerged as a major research facility and provider of mouse strains and databases, no doubt contributing to the current eminence of the mouse as a model organism for the study of human disease. Woychik's appointment is a logical step. With a solid background in mouse genetics (most notably, the cloning of *agouti*) and a career that has included work in academia and industry, Woychik should come equipped with the relevant scientific and business knowledge. A review of Woychik's biography indicates that since 1997 he has gone from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, to Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, to the Parke-Davis Laboratory for Molecular Genetics in California, to Lynx Therapeutics, also in California, to land, now, at The Jackson Lab. Let's hope that the mice and lobster are sufficiently enticing to ensure that Woychik gathers a little moss in Bar Harbor, Maine.



Richard Woychik will take his post as director of The Jackson Laboratory in August.