

Taking African health issues to the top

An international group of 15 health specialists, including five Tanzanian doctors and members of the World Bank, recently climbed to the top of Africa's highest mountain in an effort to raise public awareness of African health issues. The 19,344 ft Kilimanjaro climb took three days and was sponsored by the World Bank, the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). In addition to the HIV/AIDS epidemic facing the continent, diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis are escalating throughout Africa. "The people of Africa still suffer a huge burden of preventable disease and death," said Richard Feachem of the World Bank, currently the leading financier of African healthcare projects.



Not quite GATTACA

"The Cutting Edge," a play by Jason Kravits, was the dramatic highlight of the annual meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics in Baltimore last month. The 45-minute drama succeeded in stimulating discussion among the teenage audience at which it was aimed. A blind girl is enraged as her sister contemplates genetic testing to know her chances of having a blind baby. The girl's boyfriend, who says every baby should be given every chance to be



"normal" in a world that is hard enough as it is, wants to know whether his partner carries a fictional dominant gene for blindness. Should she or shouldn't she have the test?

Sponsored by Zeneca Pharmaceuticals, the performance was followed by a debate between a panel of scientists and ethicists who also answered questions from the audience. The Bethesda Academy for the Performing Arts which is responsible for the play has received a \$100,000 grant from the NIH to produce a video that will be shown nationwide.

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Kornberg calls for scientists' association

Biomedical scientists in the US need to become more proactive. "We have to be a constituency, much like the NRA [National Rifle Association]. We have a better message than they do, why can't we sell it to our community?" This was the plea made by Nobel laureate Arthur Kornberg in a speech at the New York Academy of Sciences last month, in which he focused on the state of biomedical research in the run up to the next millennium.

Kornberg believes that there is currently no professional science organization that is able to communicate effectively with the government and public. "There are a few scattered voices," says Kornberg "and the National Academy of Sciences does not do anything." Despite his obvious enthusiasm and optimism regarding the scientific achievements made in the last century, Kornberg went on to warn of the threat posed to basic research—"the lifeline of

practical advances in medicine"—by the lack of adequate national support.

He said that the possibilities afforded by the genetic revolution are beset by a number of serious problems. These include an uninformed or misinformed public fostering anti-science attitudes, schisms within the scientific community and the possible abuses of the advances made in science and technology. These are the areas in which Kornberg thinks a new organization of scientists can make a difference.

Kornberg, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1959 for his discovery of DNA polymerase, a key enzyme involved in DNA replication and repair, also offered his views on research funding. Shortage of funding has, he lamented, given way to a pervasive mood among biomedical scientists today to choose safe and practical projects over those that are more adventurous. He also sees a potential dan-

ger for the future of research in the collaborations that develop out of necessity between academic institutions and biotechnology companies that are "not in business to do research but in research to do profitable business."

Kornberg painted a picture of research as a creative process, akin to an art, that should not be restricted. "It is tragic that the NIH budget is fought over every year," said Kornberg, "especially when basic research takes only one percent of every health care dollar in the US." He warned of the danger of the developing trend towards funding science that is targeted and more strategic, and he repeatedly stated that this rationale is flawed because "discoveries cannot be planned."

Kornberg's mission to get scientists to become more proactive in instructing congress is underscored with a simple slogan that should prove effective: "If you think research is expensive, try disease."

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