

born through such practices are likely to be of similar age and to grow up in the same area. A significant percentage of couples may, unknowingly, be closely related.

These serious problems have not received sufficient attention, and are likely to be contributing to the birth of children with serious genetic conditions. It is therefore essential that the availability of wider reproductive choices in modern society should be coupled to education about the risks of consanguinity and the provision of free DNA testing for all people of reproductive age, competently administered by an independent authority under strict regulations. This would empower every couple to make an informed choice, based on their genetic relatedness, on whether to proceed with childbearing or to seek alternative solutions. Such a service will result in immediate benefits for both the participating individuals and society at large.

The information acquired through consanguinity testing should be archived by the testing authority to facilitate long-term follow-up. The consanguinity database could be made accessible to the police authorities searching for matches with samples taken from crime scenes, but the identity of any positive samples should be revealed to the police authorities only after proper, independent authorization.

Consanguinity testing can thus complement DNA profiling of convicted individuals by police authorities, without the negative connotations of neonatal DNA screening.

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Why response-mode research loses out

Sir — Knowledge inferred from DNA sequences can make an important contribution to taxonomy, as discussed in Correspondence by Diethard Tautz *et al.* (*Nature* **418**, 479; 2002). But I fear that structural research-funding problems stand in the way of initiatives such as this, at least in the United Kingdom.

No charitable foundation is dedicated to the support of work in non-medical evolution and taxonomy; the UK's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) is the main funding agency. However, as witnessed by my drawerful of alpha-rated but unfunded proposals, it does not appear to have enough money to go around. Systematic sequencing is a long-haul activity that needs long-term, modest

funding. But proposals for the continuation of any line of work have to compete with the entire range of what is newest and best in the field (in my case, the whole of marine science), a competition that no proposal to do "more of the same" can possibly win, no matter how rare or how choice the samples.

Worse still, despite all the evidence that centralization leads to waste and failure, NERC sequesters a large proportion of its funds in thematic programmes, which many believe distort the research enterprise and give preferential funding access to largely self-selected coteries. Two questions that cannot be answered are these: "How many funded thematic projects would have succeeded in open competition?" and "Do thematic programmes provide better science than the (many more) response-mode proposals that would otherwise have been fundable?". History provides the best guide to an answer. Before research councils were invented and before they started controlling research direction, British science was internationally well-regarded and successful. Is it still? How about a decade or two of response-mode-only funding, with all proposals in equal and open competition?

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Europe is not yet ready for a research council

Sir — The suggestion of a European Research Council (ERC) is again in the news (*Nature* **419**, 108–109, 2000; *Nature* **418**, 259, 2002). In the context of continued underfunding of basic research in many European Union (EU) countries, with the possible exception of the United Kingdom, and the limitations of EU Framework funding, an alternative source of funds for competitive grants has to be welcomed. However, there are many problems to be anticipated if the ERC is to be effective.

Setting up an ERC now would be premature. First, the chronic state of underachievement by most EU countries in the basic sciences desperately needs attention. Governments and national funding agencies must spend substantially more money, and seriously promote more democratic and satisfying career structures, permitting scientists to fulfil their potential. Failing this, we shall never be able to compete at the European level with the United States. There seems little sign that EU member states realize the seriousness of the situation.

In principle, an ERC with an adequate level of funding and a mechanism for administering funds could at some stage make European science more competitive. But an ERC with a life-science budget less than that of the NIH, or similar to that of the UK's Wellcome Trust, for example, will be inadequate and counterproductive.

Equally, an ERC that is subject to the constraints of the over-bureaucratic Framework programmes would be a disappointment. To be effective, an ERC would also need to have the means, the will, the power and the independence to change attitudes. It would need to set standards of training, career development and salaries for young scientists in much the same way as the Wellcome Trust over the past 15–20 years has dramatically raised standards in the United Kingdom.

It seems inconceivable that EU member states, many of whom underfund and fail to democratize their own national research bases, will sufficiently fund a supranational agency which they could perceive as undercutting their control over scientific policy. Any significant input of funds from the current Framework programmes, already inadequate in relation to demand, also seems unrealistic.

If insignificant amounts of money are made available to an ERC, why bother with it? It would be just another peripheral funding body, allowing member states to shrug off the more serious problems at home. In the life sciences, member governments could more effectively simply increase their contributions to the Human Frontier Science programme (well administered but chronically short of funds), or to the European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO) to allow expansion of its excellent graduate-student and postdoctoral programmes.

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*See also the Commentary, pages 249–250
of this issue — Editor, Correspondence*

Element of confusion

Sir — I enjoyed your News Feature "A very brief encounter" (*Nature* **418**, 815–816; 2002) on the very heavy elements and their reactivity. I was a little perplexed, however, by the periodic table on page 816 that identified element 110 as H, particularly as H is already included elsewhere in the table (correctly) as element 1, hydrogen.

Element 110, of course, is not yet named.

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