

# Asia backs E-Biomed 'with peer review'

[TOKYO] The Asia-Pacific International Molecular Biology Network (IMBN) last week endorsed in principle the proposal for a global repository of biomedical literature — known as 'E-Biomed' — put forward by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH).

But the organization, which brings together life scientists in the Asia-Pacific region, followed the lead of the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) in reacting cautiously to the suggestion that the repository should contain unrefereed submissions. It stressed that the interpretation of biological research results requires critical review from a third party.

At their second international conference, held in Singapore, IMBN members backed a motion by Frank Gannon, executive director of EMBO, on which IMBN is modelled, which last month indicated its intention to provide European input into E-Biomed (see *Nature* 400, 97; 1999).

Gannon has indicated that E-Biomed should have an international governing board represented by the NIH, EMBO and an Asian entity. IMBN, which represents 14 countries in the region, including Australia, China, Indonesia, Korea, Japan and Singapore, was considered the most appropriate.

"IMBN will support the concept of E-Biomed and the approach EMBO is taking

with the planned initiative," says Gurinder Shahi, executive director of the IMBN. But he admits that "the devil is always in the detail", pointing out, for example, that one of EMBO's main concerns over E-Biomed is the risk of losing income through its journals.

"This is a slight worry for us too, as we are planning to launch our own journal, including an electronic-only version, between 2000 and 2001," he says. "But the priority is to recognize the importance of Asian participation in E-Biomed. The most important thing is to ensure IMBN's inclusion in E-Biomed at an early stage, so that we could provide a direction in the initiative."

Many Asian life scientists say they welcome the concept of the planned repository and would benefit from its simple, fast and barrier-free system. They say it would be particularly attractive to scientists in developing countries, as it would facilitate timely access to materials and information that are currently too expensive to subscribe to or are significantly delayed in their delivery.

"We also hope that E-Biomed would help to break the strong dependence on 'high impact factor' journals in Asian countries for assessing research performance," says Chris Tan, director of the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Singapore.

Tan predicts that the repository would

narrow the gap between so-called 'brand name' journals, such as *Nature* and *Science*, and other journals that cover more specialized areas of science. He says that a system such as E-Biomed would help to liberate knowledge currently confined to specialized journals and encourage its distribution to Asian researchers.

But he is also concerned about the absence of peer review in the E-Biomed proposal. "The downside of E-Biomed is the risk of attracting too much garbage if the peer-review system is not at work. Although [the] system suffers from slow review times, I feel that it should be retained," says Tan.

"Submissions of papers from the Asia-Pacific region, particularly from developing countries, would be greatly encouraged by E-Biomed, which would provide a more accessible platform for publication," says Jerry Wang, professor of biochemistry at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. But he also agrees that some form of quality control should operate.

IMBN may push for a wider range of life-science literature to be included in the repository, as it now recognizes new areas of interest such as agricultural and environmental sciences. This may already be under way, as there is talk of changing the name from 'E-Biomed' to 'E-Biosci'.

Asako Saegusa

## Varmus speculates on a possible reorganization of the NIH

[BAR HARBOR, MAINE] Harold Varmus, the director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), said last week that it was time to discuss how the huge biomedical agency might be remodelled to increase its effectiveness — for example, by consolidating it into a smaller number of independent institutes and giving an expanded director's office more power.

Speaking at a symposium on the future of genetics organized by the Jackson Laboratory, of Bar Harbor, Maine, and the Johns Hopkins University, Varmus said that the NIH should aim to "organize the science in a rational way". Rather than continuing to subdivide the \$15.6 billion agency — which since its founding in the 1930s has grown into more than two dozen institutes, centres and divisions — he said that more might be achieved by having fewer centres of power.

Under one proposal, put forward, he said, purely for discussion purposes, there might be just five institutes — based on research into cancer, neuroscience, general medical sciences, human development, and microbial and environmental sciences.

A proposed brain institute would encompass the activities of the National Institute of Mental Health, the National



Varmus (top right) addresses a recent hearing in Congress surrounded by young diabetes sufferers. Should research into the disease remain the responsibility of a separate institute?

Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. A revised National Institute of General Medical Sciences would include the work of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases and that of the National Institute of Arthritis

and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases.

Under this scheme, a transformed Office of the Director, perhaps called 'NIH Central', would oversee the institutes. This would direct policy, oversee the Library of Medicine and the Center for Information Technology, and support training, peer review and activities not handled by the institutes.

Varmus said that the central office should have broader responsibilities and a budget enabling it to support special initiatives, such as developing technologies relevant to research across the institutes. It should also have the flexibility to redirect funding on a project's completion.

The comments came amid rumours that Varmus, who has directed the NIH since 1993, is being considered to head the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. The *New York Observer* last week quoted the director of another New York cancer centre as saying that the hiring of Varmus is "close to being done".

Varmus will not confirm or deny reports that he is leaving the NIH. Anne Thomas, his spokeswoman, says that Varmus "has had conversations with Memorial Sloan-Kettering, and with other institutions. He has not made a final arrangement with any." Carina Dennis