

Hopes of biotech interest spur Latvian population genetics

Alison Abbott, Munich

Latvia has become the latest small European country to seek to gather genetic information on its population, in an attempt to entice the interest of international researchers and biotechnology firms.

A law being considered there would set guidelines for collecting medical and genomic information from the population, as well as data on its lifestyle. The guidelines are based on those used in neighbouring Estonia, where a similar programme is under way. Iceland has already developed a more ambitious and controversial project (*Nature* 396, 395; 1998), giving one company, deCODE, rights to its genetic data.

Latvia, with a population of 2.4 million, has a very small human-genetics research programme. The new initiative would allow this to be extended, as well as developing gene associations that might interest drug companies, says Elmars Grens, a molecular biologist at the University of Latvia in Riga, who helped to instigate it.

Grens is also co-founder of a start-up company called GENDP, which he hopes will win the contract for the high-throughput genotyping. The law has the support of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Its vice-president, Juris Ekmanis, says it will mean a lot for Latvian science.

Grens says that a three-year pilot study, recruiting 40,000 patients, could start in 2002 if the law is passed, as many expect, by the end of this year.

Kári Stefánsson, director of deCODE Genetics, the company that controls much of Iceland's national genetic information programme, welcomed the Latvian initiative, but warned that "these initiatives are not easily turned into business". ■

Physicist claims gagging over missile defence system



Indefensible: Postol, seen here with a model of a mobile missile launcher, says the system is ineffective.

Jonathan Knight

A physicist and expert on national security says that the Pentagon is trying to silence his criticism of the US missile-defence programme.

Theodore Postol, Professor of Science, Technology and National Security Policy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has said for years that the technology required to create an effective missile shield over the United States does not exist.

The Defense Security Service, which handles military clearance for the Pentagon, has now asked MIT to recover the documents used by Postol to support his claims, and to persuade him to stop discussing them.

Postol has security clearance because he is a frequent adviser to the Pentagon on national-security issues.

Last year, Postol accused the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO) of doctoring the results of a series of tests on the Pentagon's prototype missile-defence system to make it appear to be effective. In a letter to the White House in May 2000, he wrote that the BMDO's own data show that the system is less accurate than random guessing at telling real missiles from balloon decoys.

As evidence, he provided an unclassified report by the Department of Defense, detailing the BMDO test results. He also disseminated the report over the Internet.

But soon after, the Pentagon reclassified parts of the report as secret and sent three agents to discuss the issue with Postol at his

office at MIT. "I told them my policy is if anybody asks me for the report I give it to them," Postol says of the meeting. Earlier this year he provided it to the General Accounting Office, an investigative branch of the US Congress.

According to Postol, who now stands to lose his security clearance, the Defense Security Service's request to MIT is a clear attempt to keep him quiet. He points out that the documents are freely available on the Internet.

Many academics who specialize in government or military affairs have security clearance, and if the government can prevent public information from being discussed merely by declaring controversial material secret, says Postol, it could have a chilling effect on scholarship. "There are profoundly important issues of academic freedom at stake here."

The Pentagon has declined to discuss the case, but argues that holders of security clearance are required to keep secrets safe no matter how they were obtained, and even if they were obtained before they were made secret.

MIT President Charles Vest says that "MIT defends the right of our faculty to serve as responsible critics within the limits of the law". He did not say what action, if any, the institute will take. But he expressed concern in a statement that the government would try to classify widely available information as secret in order to limit the debate by academic experts. ■

♦ <http://www.armscontrol.ru/start/archive/news0005.htm#postol>



Capital gains? The Latvian capital Riga hopes to benefit from the information initiative.