

electrolyte solution. The system consists of a poly(2-acryl-amido-2-methyl propane sulphonic acid) gel doped with *n*-dodecyl pyridinium chloride surfactant. They show how a ratchet-type 'gel looper' can 'crawl' along a bar when a 20 V voltage is supplied.

At the most recent meeting of the Society of Polymer Science of Japan Polymer Gels Group, held last month in the science city of Tsukuba, a number of demonstrations of intelligent gel technology were shown at the so-called 'Robo-Bug Fest'. Examples included a polymer gel finger that works in air (see figure) rather than in solution, a significant advance; a gel beetle that can crawl up an incline; a gel-powered rotational micromotor; a flapping gel wing; and a gel Ferris wheel. A notable aspect of the progress in this area is the powerful synergy of university, government and industrial research, a liaison driven by the Agency of Industrial Sci-

ence and Technology of the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry.

At the moment the study of externally responsive gels is still in its infancy, and there remain some potential problems before they can be successfully exploited in terms of applications. For example, the gels respond rather slowly, typically over timescales of minutes. But the time required for a spherical gel to shrink is proportional to the square of its radius, so that sufficient speed could be obtained by miniaturization, and the construction of gel microfibrils is already being discussed. Applications might then include the construction of devices which can be inserted into muscle to emulate a nerve response. □

Kanji Kajiwara is at the Kyoto Institute of Technology, Kyoto, Sakyo-ku, Matsugasaki, 606 Japan. Simon B. Ross-Murphy is in the Biomolecular Sciences Division, King's College London, London W8 7AH, UK.

CANCER

Carcinogens leave fingerprints

Bert Vogelstein and Kenneth W. Kinzler

DETECTIVES on the trail of the causes and mechanisms of cancer have been working hard to connect specific environmental agents with particular molecular changes that occur in carcinogenesis. This pursuit has now led^{1,2} to the indictment of two suspects who left their fingerprints at the scene of the crime. The suspects, aflatoxin B₁ and ultraviolet light, have long been on the wanted list because of their suspected involvement in liver and skin tumours, respectively.

The new findings are the result of the convergence of two areas of inquiry. First, epidemiology has indicated that certain environmental factors are associated with an increased incidence of cancer; these associations cannot by themselves illuminate mechanism, but because many of the factors concerned are genotoxic it has seemed that induced mutations might be to blame. Second, molecular genetics has identified genes that appear to be responsible for the initiation and/or progression of tumours. Are these oncogenes and tumour suppressor genes the primary targets of environmental factors?

Because oncogenes were identified before tumour suppressor genes, they were the first to be examined in this regard. It has now been exhaustively demonstrated that rodent cancers induced by exposure to a variety of carcinogens often contain mutations in *ras* oncogenes (see any recent issue of the journal *Molecular Carcinogenesis*). Importantly, the base changes in the mutant *ras* genes are

generally characteristic of those caused by the carcinogens in simple mutagen assays³, implying that the carcinogen can interact directly with mammalian genes and produce mutations at the site of interaction. A cell which thereby acquires a mutation in a *ras* gene is endowed with a selective growth advantage and clonally expands to form a tumour.

Similar studies on *ras* genes in human tumours have not been as productive, for two reasons. First, a relatively small number of human tumour types contain *ras* mutations at significant frequency⁴. Second, and more important, there are only a few codons in *ras* which, when mutated, result in oncogenic activation *in vivo*. These facts limit the comparisons that can be made and the conclusions that can be deduced from the examination of mutations in different tumours.

In contrast, some suppressor genes (in particular, p53) are mutated in a significant fraction of many different types of human cancer. Moreover, such genes can be inactivated by mutations at numerous sites, through point mutations, deletions or insertions. The first suggested link between a specific carcinogen and p53 came last year when Harris, Ozturk and their colleagues reported that G→T transversions at codon 249 (arginine to serine) were found in hepatocellular carcinomas (HCC) from southern Africa and east Asia; mutations at this position were rarely found in tumours of the colon, lung, breast or

Lost and found

To lose a type specimen is unfortunate, but to lose an entire collection might be construed as carelessness — especially if part of it turns up after nearly 200 years under one's very nose. It also causes confusion, as happened after the insect collections of the Swedish entomologist G. J. Billberg were destroyed by fire in 1822. The collections contained many type specimens of important tropical beetle species, and their loss has long inhibited beetle taxonomy. But it has turned out that Billberg's brother-in-law, C. J. Schönherr, was also an entomologist, and that the two had traded specimens. As J. Ferrer discovered (*Annals of the Transvaal Museum* **35**, 279–283; 1991), seven of Billberg's lost type specimens were indeed buried, unrecognized, in Schönherr's own collections, kept at the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet in Stockholm.

Martian moraines

VAST ice sheets once lay over the poles of Mars, covering as much as one-fifth of the planet's surface, say J. S. Kargel and R. G. Strom (*Geology* **20**, 3–7; 1992). The authors compared Viking pictures of the planet's surface with glacial landforms on Earth. Extensive ridge patterns, they argue, can only be eskers, sand-and-gravel deposits laid down in channels below ice sheets. Drumlins and subglacially eroded tunnel valleys are also identified. From the cratering record, Kargel and Strom suggest that the glaciation (which lasted perhaps 20 million years) may have occurred as little as 250 million years ago. If correct, their interpretation supports the notion that the planet has known periods much warmer than its present CO₂-freezing climate.

Shooting match

THE beginning of the end of the dishonourable history of the Dum-Dum bullet may be marked by a report by R. M. Coupland *et al.* in *The Lancet* (**339**, 35–37; 1992). Dum-Dums and other bullets which fragment easily after hitting their targets, and thereby cause particularly nasty wounds, were outlawed by the Hague Declaration of 1899. But until now there has been no objective way of knowing if such ammunition has been used. Coupland *et al.* looked at 1,287 wound radiographs from four hospitals and show that the extent of bullet break-up and wound severity can be assessed from measurement of degree of bone fracture and of metallic fragments on the radiograph. They were able to identify one hospital with an especially high incidence of wounds caused by bullet fragmentation, and point out that their study has important implications for upholding humanitarian law.