

Tunisian institute to tackle secrets of malaria genome

Washington. Daniel Cohen, head of the team that produced the first-generation physical map of the human genome and director of the Centre des Etudes du Polymorphisme Humain (CEPH) in Paris, is stepping up a campaign to establish a genomics research institute in Tunisia.

The institute would work on the genome of *Plasmodium falciparum*, the bacterium responsible for the most severe form of human malaria which kills between three and four million people annually.

Cohen's aim is for the Tunisian institute to be the first of several in developing countries that promote technology transfer through high quality research on diseases of importance to the developing world. Part of the plan is to train and employ native-born scientists.

Jeffrey Ravetch, head of the Laboratory of Biochemical Genetics at the Sloan Kettering Institute in New York, would be responsible for the institute's scientific programme. Ravetch has been involved in malaria research for 10 years and over the past three years has applied techniques developed by the human genome project to the *P. falciparum* genome. He has written the science proposal for Ifriqya, a fund-raising foundation set up by Cohen two months ago in France and named after the ancient name for Tunisia, which he intends to establish soon in the United States.

Ravetch's laboratory is one of five in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia that are working on *P. falciparum* with funding from the Burroughs-Wellcome Trust. He emphasizes that the science proposal for Ifriqya is still at a preliminary stage. But he adds: "If all goes ahead, the Tunisian institute's work would be rolled into our current effort."

Cohen, who is making a major commitment to the Tunisian venture, will next week seek financial backing from Burroughs-Wellcome. He is also planning to approach wealthy French industrial families and is organizing fund-raising concerts at which he plays the piano.

Since first formulating his ideas for high-tech transfer two years ago, Cohen has raised \$1 million of the \$5 million he needs to build the institute, and the Tunisian government has donated the land.

Cohen's plans received a setback when representatives of the French government on CEPH's board recently turned down his request to put one or two per cent of CEPH's budget into the project. But Cohen says that the French research minister, François Fillon, has told him that at CEPH's next meeting this veto will be withdrawn.

Ravetch says that the Ifriqya initiative has four broad scientific aims: to develop

the expression tags for cloned-DNA libraries of the organism's genes (perhaps 3,500 genes) and create a physical map; to develop a genetic map; to develop techniques for transforming the parasite during the only

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Malaria: still major killer.

stage of its life cycle that can currently be cultured *in vitro*; and finally to sequence the whole genome.

Cohen is now recruiting members to Ifriqya's scientific board and hopes to attract well-known figures such as Jacques Cousteau and James Watson, who he says have given him much intellectual encouragement.

Helen Gavaghan

French minister bends to protests over CNRS funds

Paris. François Fillon, the French minister of research, last week announced that he was making available FF200 million (US\$39 million) of emergency funds to alleviate the financial crisis at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).

He is also trying to find additional money to eliminate the need for CNRS's controversial decision that researchers reduce their spending to 60 per cent of the funds they had been allocated for the year. The decision had led to widespread protests throughout France (see *Nature* 371, 639; 1994).

At the same time, Fillon said that "dismantling" CNRS is "out of the question", although he does not rule out change. This response was prompted by concern over proposals contained in an internal government circular to shift control of half of CNRS's 1,300 laboratories to universities.

The circular had also suggested switching half the funds that CNRS laboratories now receive to a series of new programmes awarded to groups on the basis of peer review of grant proposals.

But Fillon said that concern about reforms of CNRS is "premature" as these are still "non-existent".

D. B.

Stanford ends research costs row

San Francisco. The US Office of Naval Research (ONR) has dropped charges of fraud and wrongdoing against Stanford University in California after the university agreed last week to pay the US government \$1.2 million to settle a four-year-old dispute over its billing of indirect costs for government research between 1981 and 1992.

The university had already paid \$2 million to the government shortly after ONR accused it in 1990 of overcharging by up to \$185 million during the previous decade. It admitted to 'errors' that include depreciation for a yacht that had been donated to the student sailing programme, part of a scandal that led to the resignation of Stanford's then president, Donald Kennedy.

University officials said last week that they felt relieved and vindicated by the low level of the final settlement accepted by the government, and the fact that the charges against it had been dropped. "With [the settlement] behind us, Stanford can devote its attention fully to its ongoing mission of teaching and research on the frontiers of knowledge", Gerhard Casper, the university's president, said in a statement.

The government has now set in place a series of regulations addressing the ambi-

guities that underlie the disagreement over Stanford's billing system. "The parameters are much clearer", said Lieutenant Commander Kenneth Ross, a spokesman for the Navy. Stanford had not acted with fraudulent or criminal intent, he said, "but it was not the way we perceived things should be done".

The ONR negotiates with 39 US universities on indirect cost billing rates on research for itself and all other federal agencies. The money covers the costs of administration, libraries, student services and any other item that cannot be directly charged to a particular grant or contract.

Under a new rule announced last week, ONR said it would shift to a multi-year approach in its negotiations. This is the last of more than 17 changes in the rules that the government has introduced since the Stanford dispute highlighted the issue.

Reed Brimhall, director of the office of government costs and rate studies at Stanford, says that the new rules have generally worked to shift costs from the government to universities. For example, he says, a new limit on administrative expenses and student services is unrealistic and is exceeded by most major research universities in the United States.

Sally Lehman