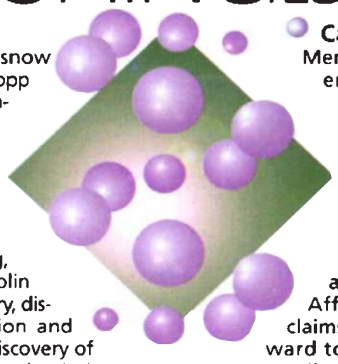
TOUCHING**base**

HGM '97—a port in a storm



One dark and stormy night in March, with the snow swirling around the city of Toronto and the Hale–Bopp comet keeping vigil above, a knot of scientists gathered in a local hostelry to quaff port and reflect on the day's feast of presentations at the Human Genome Meeting, HGM '97. One of their number raised his head to ask of the results of the poster competition. "As if you were going to win it", laughed his comrades, portentously. Propped up in the elevator the following morning, having narrowly missed the results of the ballot, Colin Collins, of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, discovered that his poster, 'The molecular dissection and sequencing of a 20q13.2 breast cancer amplicon: discovery of candidate oncogenes' had won first prize — a year's subscription to *Nature Genetics* and a goodly sum of cash with which to celebrate (port, anyone?). His poster presented work done in collaboration with colleagues at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, at Tempere University in Finland and at Rabbithutch Biotechnology and the University of California in San Francisco. The second prize, a year's subscription to *Nature Genetics* and *Nature*, went to Lucy Osborne of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, for her presentation on the 'Identification and implication of the neuronal-specific syntaxin 1A (*STX1A*) gene in the commonly deleted region of Williams syndrome', the result of work carried out with collaborators at Yale University. Yoji Kukita of Kyushu University in Japan, who discovered that 'SSCP analysis of long DNA fragments in a low pH gel' is efficient and informative, won the third prize, a year's subscription to *Nature Genetics*. Many thanks to the organizers of the conference for organizing a sterling complement of talks and an inspiring meeting all round.

California suit

Mergers, lawsuits and patent claims — just another quiet month in the genomics biotechnology industry. The simmering rivalry between two California companies developing DNA chip technology may turn into a legal battle. Hyseq, Inc., has sued Affymetrix alleging infringement of its sequencing-by-hybridization technique which is covered in two patents issued to R. Drmanac and R. Crkvenjakov. Hyseq is looking to obtain damages and profits. Stephen Fodor, President of Affymetrix, says his company has heard of these claims "third hand over several years", and looks forward to proving them false. In an effort to build its gene discovery capabilities, Progenitor Inc. (a subsidiary of Interneuron Pharmaceuticals) has agreed to pay $22 million to acquire Mercator Genetics, the California company that reported in *Nature Genetics* last August the cloning of the putative gene for the common genetic disorder haemochromatosis, and which also has interests in cancer and asthma. Meanwhile, Last month's report in *Nature Genetics* from Craig Warden of the University of California, Davis, and colleagues on the cloning of the murine obesity-related gene, uncoupling protein-2 (UCP2), has prompted Millennium Pharmaceuticals to announce that it cloned the same gene in 1994, and that it is contained within an international patent application published last year. In addition, the company has received a Notice of Allowance from the US Patent and Trademark Office for certain claims related to the human homologue, details of which will be published in the May issue of *Diabetes*.

Cheeseheads unite

Scientists at the Institute of Molecular Medicine in Oxford have identified a living relative of the famous 'Cheddar Man', a 9,000-year-old Stone Age skeleton that was unearthed back in 1903 from a network of caves in Cheddar, 130 miles west of London. Brian Sykes' team extracted DNA from a molar in the Cheddar Man's skull, and compared portions of the maternally inherited mitochondrial DNA with DNA from 15 schoolchildren from Cheddar and five local residents. The scientists found a match with 42-year-old Adrian Targett, who teaches history at the Kings of Wessex school and lives just half a mile from where the 'Cheddar Man' remains were found. Sykes says that Targett and Cheddar Man "would have shared a common ancestor about 10,000 years ago so they are related — just not very closely." (It is not clear whether Cheddar Man himself had any children.) Some experts believe the findings support the notion that the Britons are derived from a population of hunter-gatherers. Commenting on the news, Targett's wife said "Maybe it explains why he likes his steaks rare."

"We can't see a clinical reason to copy a human being. In this country, it is illegal already."
— ***Dr Ian Wilmut**, leader of the Scottish team that reported its successful sheep cloning experiments in* Nature.

"We fund hundreds of projects at research institutions and this one has been a success and the contract is being concluded."
— *A **Ministry of Agriculture** spokesman, defending the government's decision to cease funding cloning research at the Roslin Insitute.*

"This technology allows us to move from procreation to replication. It means that an individual can self-reproduce. We're really talking about the ability to move toward . . . a counterfeit culture."
— ***Jeremy Rifkin** (biotechnology critic).*

"I am issuing a directive that bans the use of any federal funds for any cloning of human beings."
— ***President Bill Clinton**.*

"I think it would be mind-bogglingly fascinating to watch a younger edition of myself growing up in the 21st century instead of the 1940s."
— ***Richard Dawkins** (author of* The Selfish Gene*).*

"Mother Teresa (21 percent) . . . Michelle Pfeiffer (7.7 percent) . . . Hillary Rodham Clinton (2.3 percent)."
— *Results of a Maricopa Research poll asking people to select their preferred cloning picks from a list of eight people.*

"At parties, you're no longer automatically the biggest loser in the room. . . You'll get to know Michael Jackson during meetings of the Genetic Oddities Club . . . Three words: frequent flier miles."
— *Extracts from television talk-show host **David Letterman's** Top Ten list, 'Good things about having a clone'.*

"We could probably get the original Kool & the Gang back together. That would be so much better than a sheep."
— ***Dave Barry** (humorist).*

"Parents have the right to decide to have a baby who will bear the genetic code of one of them . . . Imagine the joy of a widow raising a child looking like her beloved deceased husband."
— ***Dr Brigitte Boisselier,** scientific director of the Bahamas-based company Clonaid, which plans to offer offshore human cloning for $200,000.*