

TOUCHINGbase

Wanted: TCACCGTT . . .

"John Doe" is a name used by the police in the United States when issuing a warrant for arrest in cases where the accused is known only by an alias or physical description (a warrant must identify the person for whom it is issued). The defendant with no name has now gone genetic: in October, a prosecutor in Wisconsin filed rape and kidnapping charges against a man whose identity is defined by his genotype. The potential use of genetic information for purposes other than for which it was originally obtained is a concern to many, and the validity of genetic evidence seems, at times, a moveable entity in the eye of the juror. Compare, for example, the unquestioning acceptance of the results obtained from Monica Lewinsky's blue dress, and, despite incriminating genetic evidence, the acquittal of O.J. Simpson (see *Nature* (vol. 401, 531; 1999) for an essay discussing technology, perception and power). Assuming safeguards against inappropriate use of genetic information—for example, by health insurance companies—the correct identification of rapists can only be a good thing. Judging by the number of unresolved rape cases for which there is unexamined forensic evidence (New York City, for example, has 12,000), the value of an accurate, rapid means of analysis should not be underestimated.

To your health!

As the season of single malts draws nigh, so too does a more comprehensive understanding of what makes for that warm, inner glow. The extent to which one is susceptible to the behavioural effects of alcohol depends on the sensitivity of a receptor for the inhibitory neurotransmitter γ -aminobutyrate type A (GABA_A). In the current issue of *Nature Neuroscience* (vol. 2, 997–1002; 1999), Clyde Hodge and colleagues conclude that the sensitivity of this receptor may be mediated by protein kinase C ϵ (PKC ϵ), an enzyme that phosphorylates it. They find that mice lacking PKC ϵ are less likely to self-administer alcohol compared with wild-type mice. The PKC ϵ -deficient mice also have a heightened sensitivity to the behavioural effects of alcohol: low doses of ethanol result in increased locomotor activity compared with that of wild-type animals, and high doses of alcohol invoke enhanced sedative effects. These findings suggest that phosphorylation by PKC ϵ inhibits the GABA_A receptor—and raise the possibility that alcoholism, which is associated with low sensitivity to alcohol, could be treated with inhibitors of PKC ϵ .



Reproduced with kind permission from Private Eye

"I suppose it had to happen—
genetically modified crop circles"

Dr Horton says that three of the six referees recommended publication. One . . . argued for publication on the grounds that not to do so would lead to accusations of a conspiracy to suppress information. This referee, however, strongly dissented from the study's conclusion, saying it was wild speculation.

—Steve Conner, *The Independent*

[on Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, defending the publication of a contentious paper on the effect of genetically-modified potato on rats]

After the genome

With a view to sensibly investing resources 'after the genome' (which appropriately abbreviates to ATG), the Medical Research Council (MRC) of the United Kingdom convened a working group earlier this year to ponder possibilities. Headed by Thomas W. Meade, of the MRC, the group of 12 people has met three times and will meet once again in late November before submitting a proposal to both the MRC and the Wellcome Trust. The proposal will address the need to identify 'disease' genes of low to moderate penetrance, and to better understand and identify genes that interact with environmental factors in exerting their effect. Both goals will necessitate the genotyping of a vast number of DNA samples. The proposal will concern aspects of obtaining such samples, collectively referred to as "The UK Population Biomedical Collection", and will cite a set of guidelines on the collection of human samples for the purposes of research, soon to be issued by the MRC. John Bell (also of the working group and the MRC council) says that the group is concerned that "everyone understands what we are proposing and why". By this he refers not only to the scientific community, but also, the general public: "we don't want to be dumped on like those GM food guys."

You suffer many setbacks . . . what keeps you going are these little blips of excitement—it's sort of like an electrocardiogram. You have little ups and downs, for instance, grants turned down and papers turned down which you think are brilliant and some stupid reviewer . . .

—Günter Blobel