

UK names leading cancer centers

The British government has announced that a consortium involving the universities of Leeds and York—as well as the Medical Research Council's Clinical Trials Units in London—has won a national competition for operating a network for controlled trials of potential cancer treatments.

The consortium will form part of a new 'Coordinating Center' for the National Health Service's Cancer Research Network, which was announced earlier this year by the British Secretary of Health, Alan Milburn, as a move to integrate cancer research across the country for the first time (*Nature Med.* **6**, 945; 2000).

A second part of the Coordinating Center, which will be led by Peter Selby, chairman of the Centre for Cancer Medicine Research at Leeds, will be involved in translating advances from the laboratory to the clinic.

"For the first time in the NHS, we are creating a fast track to take the latest developments in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer from the laboratory to the clinic to evaluate their effectiveness for the benefit of all cancer patients," said Yvette Cooper, the minister for public health.

Although the government had previously announced extra funding for the Cancer Research Network that will total £5 million (\$7.22 million) next year, and £20 million a year by 2003, this is considerably less than the extra £200 million that a House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology had recommended be put into cancer research. But the government has accepted one of the committee's key suggestions, namely the creation of a "virtual" National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI) linking together the activities of many different research centers (*Nature Med.* **6**, 357; 2000).

In creating a virtual, rather than a physical institute, the government has sided with Britain's large cancer research charities and researchers in believing "that a single, large 'bricks and mortar' facility would not be optimal." The new Coordinating Center will form an integral part of this virtual strategy.

John Toy, the medical director of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF), says that the improved infrastructure for clinical research made possible by the research network will mean that research organizations such as the ICRF "will be able to run more and bigger trials, and complete them more quickly." Gordon McVie, director general of the Cancer Research Campaign, says, "This new initiative really will make a difference to cancer patients in Britain."

David Dickson, London

Wilson faces life ban

The US FDA has reportedly started proceedings against James Wilson, head of the Philadelphia-based Institute for Human Gene Therapy, which may lead to his being banned for life from clinical experimentation. Wilson was in charge of the fateful gene therapy trial that resulted in the death of Jesse Gelsinger (*Nature Med.* **6**, 6; 2000), who died as a result of being injected with a genetically altered virus when his medical condition was not suited to such a procedure. He is charged with several counts of failing to comply with clinical trial regulations and has 30 days to respond.

K.B.

US clamp down on web pharmacies

The United States Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has been making good its promise to increase surveillance of unlawful sales of medicines over the Internet. Within the last few weeks, it has taken steps to stop four companies from selling laetrile online. The companies claim that the compound acts against cancer, but according to the FDA, it is neither effective nor safe.

The agency has succeeded in forcing New York-based Christian Brothers Contracting to sign a permanent injunction in which it agrees to stop selling laetrile. Christian Brothers had been distributing laetrile products online despite a court order to cease selling the goods. Last year, the company had to pay \$600,000 in damages for sending emails to America Online subscribers peddling laetrile as a cancer cure. Two other Internet companies based in Florida and one in Arizona have also been issued with preliminary injunctions barring sales of laetrile products.

The FDA has significantly expanded its investigations of so-called "rogue sites" and to support its Internet enforcement activities, President Clinton requested an additional \$10 million for the FDA's 2001 budget, of which Congress has appropriated \$5 million. Bills have been introduced into the Senate and House of

Congress that would require that online pharmacies be certified as meeting state and federal laws and that they post information enabling visitors to determine where the pharmacy is located and who operates it. The proposed legislation would give FDA administrative subpoena authority enabling it to investigate potentially illegal Internet drug sales more rapidly and effectively.

More than 22 million Americans used the Internet in 1999 to find medical information, and just as a growing proportion of people are turning to the web to buy books, gifts and groceries, increasing numbers are also buying medicines online. Though several legitimate pharmacy groups trade on the web, there are also many companies that sell unapproved new drugs, prescription drugs dispensed without a valid prescription, and products marketed with fraudulent health claims.

Laetrile is one of a handful of compounds sold over the Internet that the FDA has acted against. Others include a compound made from shark cartilage sold as a treatment for cancer, a glyco alkaloid skin cream sold as a treatment for skin cancer, and a rice bran extract sold as a treatment for cancer and HIV.

Laura Bonetta, Bethesda

