Professor still missing

As *Nature Medicine* went to press, the whereabouts of the preeminent structural biologist, Don C. Wiley, remained a mystery, despite a \$25,000 reward for information on his disappearance. Wiley, professor of biophysics and biochemistry at Harvard University, has been missing since 16 November, when the police found his rental car abandoned on the Hernando de Soto Bridge in Memphis. He was last seen at a banquet for the Scientific Advisory Board of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, where he was described as being in good spirits.

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which has helped to oversee Wiley's lab for the last two weeks, added \$15,000 to the \$5,000 contributed by Harvard and \$5,000 in private donations from members of the St. Jude Hospital to help the investigation. The police are reviewing all possibilities for his disappearance and say the most likely explanation is that he committed suicide—a suggestion disputed by his family and colleagues.

Wiley's research focuses on how viral surface proteins initiate infections and how cells respond by presenting antigens and mobilizing defensive cells. He won the prestigious Lasker award in 1995 for his identification of the structure of the two classes of major histocompatibility proteins, and the Japan prize in 1999 for his discoveries of how the immune system protects humans from infections. He has also been tipped as a candidate for a Nobel Prize.

He has authored hundreds of papers, the most recent of which were published in September. One reports on the three-dimensional structures of avian H5 and swine H9 influenza hemagglutinins (HAs) from viruses closely related to those that caused outbreaks of human disease in Hong Kong in 1997 and 1999. The work improves our understanding of how receptor-binding sites of HAs from avian viruses evolve as the virus adapts to humans (*Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* **98**, 11181; 2001). Another reports on the crystal struc-

Missing in action, Don Wiley

ture of HLA-A2 complexes with modified immunodominant peptides from a melanoma tumor-associated protein. It contributes to knowledge about how such peptides can be used as candidates for melanoma immunotherapy (*J. Immunol.* **167**, 3276; 2001).

More recently, Wiley's work has looked at new ways to combat viruses such as influenza, HIV, Ebola and herpes simplex by examining how viral membrane glycoproteins are

involved in binding and entering cells, and how they evolve to escape the host immune response. The advent of bioterrorism since 11 September have led some to speculate that this could have made him the target for bioterrorists, which has attracted the attention of the FBI, although they are monitoring the situation rather than launching their own investigation.

But colleagues say kidnapping is unlikely as Wiley only worked on proteins from Ebola and HIV rather than growing the live strains in his lab. "You could think of 100 other people whom it would make more sense [for bioterrorists] to kidnap," says Gregory Verdine, professor of chemistry at Harvard.

Simon Frantz, London

'Biopiracy' issue stops research

Controversy over who holds the rights to indigenous medicinal plants has halted a \$3 million research project in Chiapas, Mexico. University of Georgia (UGA) ethnobotanist Brent Berlin led the project, one of six funded by the Fogarty International Center at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Berlin was collaborating with scientists at the Chiapas-based College of the Southern Frontier and a small Welsh company, Molecular Nature, to study tropical plants used by the Mayans to treat disease.

Although the NIH-funded researchers say they had worked closely with the native Mayan community to ensure that they would share in potential benefits from the work, some local and international groups fought the project because they believe outsiders should not be allowed to privatize and profit from community-held materials and traditions.

"The project was unacceptable to many indigenous communities in Chiapas that oppose commercial exploitation of their genetic resources and traditional knowledge," according to a statement released by the Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration. The Canadian ecology and human rights organization fought the project along with a coalition of Mayan leaders.

Elois Ann Berlin, codirector of the Mexican project and also a UGA professor, insists that community concerns

were addressed. In addition to including members of the Mayan community in their planning, the Berlins had set up a foundation to reinvest 25% of any future profits from their work back into the Mayan community. The remainder would be split evenly between UGA, College of the Southern Frontier and Molecular Nature. "We have gone further than anyone has ever gone to ensure indigenous participation and intellectual property rights," she says. "We were in the front lines of benefit sharing." The Berlins have worked in the area for more than 30 years.

The Mayan's decision to withdraw from the program led to its cancellation last month, even though \$1.3 million had already been spent on training and infrastructure. Jennifer Cabe of the Fogarty Center says the project was part of an International Biodiversity Cooperative Groups program, designed to fund work that involves three parties—a US-based principle investigator, a drug company and a university or researcher in the host country. Without the participation of all three, the program no longer qualifies for funding from the NIH program, Cabe explains. She adds that the other five projects will proceed as planned. They are located in Madagascar, Vietnam, Panama, West Africa and several locations in Latin America. As far as she knows, this sort of contentious issue has not emerged at those sites.

Tinker Ready, Boston