HIV researchers upset by Royal Society discussion of 'River theory'

Britain's Royal Society, which was established in 1660 and which "represents the interests of top quality science and technology in its interactions with government, the public and the media," has postponed until September a meeting on the origins of HIV scheduled for this month. The decision of the society to include discussion of the theory that an oral polio vaccine developed in Africa in the 1950s might have been made with chimpanzee tissue that could have been contaminated with a virus that gave rise to HIV is causing growing displeasure within the HIV research community. Many have expressed doubt that the debate would be centered on sufficiently credible scientific data—a criterion on which the society prides itself.

In a letter to a UK national newspaper last month, Royal Society President Sir

Aaron Klug explained that the meeting was postponed because "a well-balanced set of speakers" could not be engaged in time, and because results from blind analysis of original samples of the polio vaccine being carried out at three independent laboratories should be available by September.

British HIV researcher John Moore of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center, New York, entered the literary fray with a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, stating that he finds the polio vaccine theory—the basis for the controversial book *The River*, by Ed Hooper (*Nature Med.* 5, 1117; 1999)—"entirely implausible." Hooper, who remains on the speaker list for September, wrote accusing Moore of wanting "to undermine" the process of debate on the topic.

Moore's view seems to prevail among

the HIV research community in the US. "It was my impression that any scientific exchange of data would be lost in the debate of the OPV hypothesis, a position bolstered by negative or nonexistent data," says Steven Wolinsky of Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago. Wolinsky "was invited to participate as a discussant," and "Bette Korber [of Los Alamos National Laboratory] was invited to present our data," he notes.

Not only does Wolinsky question the validity of Hooper's theory, but he also questions Hooper's ethics: "...one questions the ethics of a journalist who has his benefactor write the preface for his book, no matter how well qualified that benefactor is." He is referring to the late evolutionary biologist William Hamilton (*Nature Med.* 6, 367; 2000), who gave Hooper a grant to research the book for which Hamilton wrote a laudatory forward, and also asked the Royal Society—of which he was a member—to convene the May seminar.

Stanley Plotkin of Aventis Pasteur, who worked on the original polio vaccine, believes that the original program scheduled for May "was unbalanced, but the new one is quite acceptable." Plotkin has been added to the list. He agrees that "it was desirable to postpone the meeting so that all the PCR data [from sample testing] would be available." Plotkin says, "I believe Hooper's hypothesis is simply wrong, and I will provide detailed rebuttals of his accusations (use of chimpanzee cells, correlation of vaccination and AIDS) at the meeting..." Plotkin went on to say, "I think [Hooper's] accusations against Dr. Koprowski and his coworkers (of which I was one) amount to accusations of misconduct and negligence."

Speaking on behalf of the Royal Society, virologist Robin Weiss expressed mild disappointment at the attention given to the polio vaccine section of the program, as the meeting aims to discuss widespread issues of the origins of HIV. He says that the meeting will not be postponed further if the sample results are not available and that there have been no major changes made to the speaker list, save for the fact that he has stepped down so that three phylogeneticists instead of two can take the podium. The meeting will now take place on 11–12 September.

Karen Birmingham, London & Myrna Watanabe, Connecticut

A new Salk–UCSD institute?

Several leaders of American biomedical research turned out for a symposium at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, last month, to demonstrate the strength of collaborative research projects between the Salk and its neighbor, the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Scientists from both organizations are hoping to make their 10-year-long research pact more concrete by building a new translational research institute that would combine the Salk's basic biomedical research expertise with UCSD's clinical expertise.

As La Jolla is rapidly becoming the new focus of attention for

known to be concerned that a joint center not diminish the Salk's independence. A decision is expected by year's end.

The symposium closed with the presentation of the 2000 UCSD–Salk Institute awards in molecular medicine. Christopher Reeves received the Service Award for his tireless efforts in raising public awareness of spinal chord injuries and his battle to increase the funding for biomedical research. The Translational Medicine award was presented jointly to Dennis Slamon (Director, Revlon/UCLA Womens Cancer Research Program) and Arthur Levinson (Chairman and CEO, Genentech) for their contributions to the

development of Herceptin—a new monoclonal antibody therapy for breast cancer directed against the *HER-2/neu* oncogene. The Mentorship Award was given to Donald Seldin (Chairman Emeritus, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas) for his transformation of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School into one of the most successful in the US.

Beatrice Renault, La Jolla

Ron Evans and Christopher Reeves

Courtesy of Ted Kaplan of Camera's Eye Photography