Meningitis alert in Africa

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An alarming outbreak of cerebrospinal meningitis, first detected in Nigeria last October, has now spread to seventeen countries in West and Central Africa. More than 54,600 cases (7,877 of them fatal) have been reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) since January. Although Nigeria is the hardest hit, the situation is now considered highly dangerous in five other countries, especially Burkina-Faso, where the count has reached 16,975 cases and the mortality rate almost ten percent. The epidemic has apparently spread as far as Sudan, where health services are now on the alert.

According to Ngyen B. Khanh, a WHO epidemiologist, meningitis epidemics occur frequently in the region at this time of year, but the number of cases and mortality figures are climbing more rapidly now than ever before.

Local government officials and WHO experts are trying to understand why this particular epidemic is so severe. So far, it appears that a combination of factors may have paved the way for the spread of the disease. For example, in the prevailing economic recession, health facilities of these developing countries are finding it harder to stay open, so vaccines and treatment are supplied irregularly.

WHO launched an appeal in March for donations of money and supplies, along with other international organizations, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Red Cross, and with nongovernmental organizations, such as the French "Médecins sans Frontières." The goals are to provide the disease-stricken countries with large quantities of vaccine and chloramphenicol (an effective antibiotic) to fight the disease, to train local health personnel and to send international doctors and nurses to support the fight against the epidemic.

So far, WHO has collected more than US$1 million in aid, most of which was already spent by early April. Thanks to widespread vaccination, the spread of the disease does seem to have been successfully halted in several Nigerian states. Khanh expects that international cooperation and support will now pour into Burkina-Faso.

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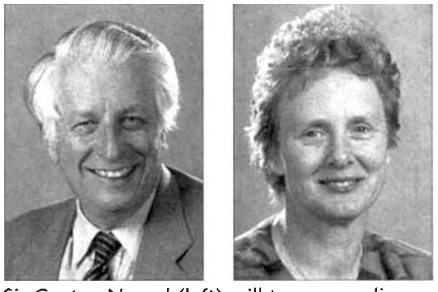
A changing of the guard in Australian science

A scientist visiting any of Melbourne's biomedical research centers over the next year might be forgiven for thinking he or she was in the wrong city. Across Melbourne, a new guard is taking over the reins of many of the institutions. According to Barry Preston, Head of the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Monash University, the explanation for this synchronized changeover probably goes back to the "Murray Commission" of the 1950s, as a result of which new universities were built and new appointments were made in the early 1960s (many of the people recruited to directorships were only in their early thirties at the time, and are now reaching retirement age).



Sir Gustav Nossal (left) will turn over directorship of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute to Suzanne Cory (right) this June.

This June, Sir Gustav Nossal, director of Melbourne's prestigious Walter and Eliza Hall Institute (WEHI) for the past thirty years, will pass on the directorship to Suzanne Cory. "A creature of the Hall Institute" (her own words), the Melbourne-born Cory was recruited by Nossal, together with husband Jerry Adams, from the United States twenty-five years ago. According to Nossal, Cory has a distinctive style, "projecting high intelligence mixed with the human touch." Cory inherits a strong WEHI, thanks to Nossal's cultivation of not only the Institute's research agenda, but also its social atmosphere.

Cory is one of Australia's most distinguished scientists. She and Adams built WEHI's first molecular biology laboratory, with early contributions in the field of immunoglobulin gene structure and organization. Subsequent work on the oncogenes involved in leukemia uncovered the first identified cell death gene — *bcl-2*. Cory now faces the challenge of leading WEHI into an era that will feel the full impact of the human genome project. As Nossal points out, Cory's genealogy is impeccable, as "a student of Francis Crick, married to a student of Jim Watson, both protégés of Fred Sanger." Cory believes WEHI is well placed to reap the fruits of the human genome project. "In five year's time we'll know all the genes, the trick is to find out what they do," she says. "Our strength is that we have molecular biology and biochemistry embedded in cell biology and whole animals."

Many of the Melbourne's scientific "new guard" have come from overseas. Joseph Sambrook (formerly director of the Center for Human Growth and Development and professor of biochemistry at Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas) is now director of the Peter McCallum Institute for Cancer Research. Robert Williamson (former head of Genetics and Biochemistry at St. Mary's Imperial College, London) now heads the Murdoch Institute (human genetic research); John Mills (formerly professor of Medicine and Microbiology and chief of the Infectious Disease Division at the University of California, San Francisco) heads the MacFarlane Burnett Centre for Medical Research (virology, AIDS research.) The incoming new head of Monash University's Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology is Stuart Stone from the department of hematology at Cambridge University. But the new head of the Howard Florey Institute (physiology research) due to take over from Professor John Coghlan at the end of the year is a local scientist — Fred Mendelsohn, professor of medicine at Melbourne's Austin hospital.

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