

In the news

THE DEVIL WITH THE DETAILS

The outlook was bleak for the Tasmanian devil until Cedric came along. Numbers have been devastated in the past 12 years by the mysterious devil facial tumour disease, which causes tumorous growths on an affected animal's face and neck that eventually make it unable to feed, usually leading to death by starvation.

Although the origin of the disease is unknown, it is believed to be spread by the tumour cells themselves, transferred by bites during mating and fighting. These cells have a similar major histocompatibility complex (MHC) type to that of most devils, which have a low genetic diversity, so the animals' immune systems do not mount a response.

Enter Cedric: the first devil to be observed to produce antibodies when injected with dead tumour cells. He comes from a less-affected population of devils on the island's west coast. Researchers at the University of Tasmania are now testing his resistance further, having injected Cedric and his half-brother Clinky, who has a similar MHC type to the cancer, with live cells. After the 6-month incubation period they will know whether Cedric's immune system is able to fight the disease. "That would be very good evidence that either we can immunise some devils with the vaccine, or either that some devils might be resistant to the disease," says veterinarian Alex Kreiss (<http://www.abc.net.au/> 31 Mar 2008).

Dr Greg Woods from the university's Menzies Research Institute is anxious to see the results: "It keeps me awake at night. We are really relying on just one devil" (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/> 31 Mar 2008). Progress is vital, or else the species is threatened with extinction within 10–20 years. "The answer could be just around the corner — or we could be back to basics," says Dr Woods (<http://www.news.com.au/> 31 Mar 2008).

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