

Nomenclature regulation

Sir— The recent leading article¹ and subsequent correspondence^{2–4} on nomenclature illustrate problems that the scientific community is largely failing to address. A general reluctance to adopt any form of nomenclature regulation will ensure a continuing increase in idiosyncratic names being associated with genes. To try to overcome this problem, the International Society for Plant Molecular Biology, through its Commission of Plant Gene Nomenclature (CPGN), has undertaken to unify gene nomenclature within ‘plants’⁵.

To achieve this goal, all plant nuclear-encoded sequences in the SwissProt and SPTREMBL databases have been grouped by cluster analysis and gene family analysis. This analysis is soon to be expanded to incorporate all eukaryotic organelle sequences. Each gene family has been assigned a unique alphanumeric identifier, whether or not it has an acceptable name. Assigning to each gene family a name that will reflect the function of the proteins within the family is a big task, and to attempt this retrospectively for the many gene families that do not have names will be time-consuming.

The assignment of unique ‘gene family numbers’ has many immediate advantages: it unifies families between species but could also be used in a wider context to unify nomenclature within the eukarya. Gene family numbers can be linked to expressed sequence tags (ESTs) and used to identify the location of the EST on chromosomal maps in place of the myriad of meaningless EST accession numbers. Gene family names would eventually replace the gene family numbers, making maps intelligible.

The CPGN’s database Mendel (<http://jiiio6.jic.bbsrc.ac.uk>) holds some 3,500 sequence records relating to approximately 300 gene families. The current analysis, when complete, will expand the number of gene families to nearer 2,000, adding a further 12,500 records. This information will be released during 1998 and will be reciprocally cross-linked to European Molecular Biology Laboratory sequence records.

In my experience, most people in the scientific community do not know of attempts to standardize nomenclature. Here surely is a role for the journals, which could not only promote the existence of nomenclature databases but could also insist on authors submitting the recognized ‘name’ or, in its absence, the gene family number besides the sequence accession number. This would inevitably force the pace of change in unifying nomenclature.

The CPGN would be pleased to

collaborate with other nomenclature projects to help promote unification of nomenclature within the eukarya.

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1. *Nature* **389**, 1 (1997).
2. Whyte, B. J. *Nature* **390**, 329 (1997).
3. Povey, S. *et al.* *Nature* **390**, 329 (1997).
4. Puente, L. *et al.* *Nature* **390**, 329 (1997).
5. *Trends Biol. Sci.* **21**, 443 (1996).

...and linguistic diversity

Sir— Lnc Puente *et al.* complain about the large number of gene and protein names that have unclear or offensive pronunciations because they lack vowels (*Nature* **390**, 329; 1997). This is a tunnel-tongued complaint, as there are many beautiful languages that use vowels much less profligately than English; in these languages, such indeterminate names may have a single pronunciation. Indeed, in Czech the name *Lck*, an example that Puente *et al.* give, has a single definitive pronunciation yet no meaning (denigrating or otherwise).

We propose that nomenclature committees embrace the richness of human linguistic diversity by indicating which language should be used to pronounce each gene and protein name. As a first step in that direction, we propose that *Srk*, *Mls* and *Prs* be given their conventional pronunciations.

We prefer linguistic liberation to acronym anarchy.

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Disadvantaged women

Sir— Two items in your issue of 4 December, “Female scientists wanted — apply to UK research councils” and “No evidence of sexism in peer review” (*Nature* **390**, 431 & 438; 1997), discuss the lower success rates of female scientists compared to their male colleagues in winning research grants. Both quote an undeniable statistic that a considerably smaller proportion of women apply for the grants in the first

place, and both appear to be baffled by the cause.

In fact the cause is simple. A much smaller proportion of the women who are loosely head-counted as ‘members of the department’ are actually in established positions. Most are supported on short-term contracts and so are debarred from applying for their own research grants from that parent (but often the most appropriate) source.

Thus a large proportion of half the equally qualified adults in a given scientific discipline do not have the opportunities to form groups and attract collaborators. Yet those opportunities are crucial for building up the group expertise and reputations that the scientific world looks for when head-hunting.

If I were to apply for a grant to research this fundamental problem, I would not expect much support.

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Pragmatism in Latin America

Sir— The coverage of the current bioethics momentum as presented in *Nature* (**389**, 658–663; 1997) is both enlightening and timely. There is, however, no reference to Latin America, which has rather belatedly taken account of bioethics, mostly in the form of ‘solutions’ to dilemmas arising in more mature scientific traditions. But some forms of bioethical reflection and teaching can be found in many Latin American countries, particularly Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Brazil and Mexico.

For example, a master’s degree programme is offered by the University of Chile with the collaboration of the Program on Bioethics of the Pan-American Health Organization established in Santiago de Chile in 1993. There are similar programmes in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia.

Like other countries, those in Latin America are confronted with the task of incorporating into local practices the pragmatism embodied in the bioethical enterprise in the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as of adapting it to their particular cultural idiosyncracies.

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