

# AIDS and confidentiality

SIR — The news item "Confidential matters" by Stephen Budiansky dealing with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (*Nature* 11 August, p.478) is an unfortunate distortion of the facts.

He erroneously states, "Incidents such as CDC's delivery of a list of names of AIDS patients to the New York Blood Center — perhaps by accident — have hardly allayed fears". CDC did not provide names to the "New York Blood Center" in general; the names were delivered by hand to a specific physician, in order to determine a crucial question: is hepatitis B vaccine safe? It was critical to determine whether hepatitis B vaccine recipients were at risk; therefore, under conditions of the Privacy Act, the names were provided under very strict procedures to be compared with the known recipients of hepatitis B vaccine in an earlier vaccine trial conducted among homosexual men in New York City. This was not done by accident, but intentionally and professionally in an attempt to resolve a critical question. This quick check allayed early fears that hepatitis B vaccine might be causing AIDS. I emphasize that it was done following the provisions of the Privacy Act and in a manner respectful of the many physicians, health officials and individuals who had placed confidence in CDC.

It is not correct to say we refused to supply information to a congressman. We only refused to supply him with the names of AIDS cases and personal identifiers in our records. On 10 May, a congressional aide requested full access to our records including the names of AIDS cases. We offered full access to the records if personal identifiers were first removed. From that time until 26 July, an exchange of letters attempted to resolve those differences until agreement was reached that names and personal identifiers would be removed before the files were seen by congressional investigators. Our files have subsequently been opened to the investigators.

All of this has been an effort in good faith to avoid releasing the names of AIDS cases. I know of no breach in that attempt. A rudimentary investigation could have prevented Mr Budiansky and *Nature* from publishing these inaccuracies.

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● Stephen Budiansky replies — Congressional investigators tell a different story. The aide who attempted to examine CDC's files in May says that CDC refused access to any documents having to do with AIDS, including policy, programme and budget documents unlikely to contain confidential patient information. "Their contention was that there were patient

names everywhere", the aide says; in fact, now that Congress has been granted access, only 31 documents out of scores examined by an investigator from Congress's General Accounting Office have turned out to contain patient information that CDC insisted on deleting. Many of these deletions involved not even patient names, but rather ages or geographical locations of patients. And contrary to Dr Foege's implication, congressional investigators say that at no time did they ask to see "names of AIDS cases". As for the CDC's supplying names of AIDS patients to the New York Blood Center, the point is simply that news of the incident, rightly or wrongly, intensified distrust of CDC within the homosexual community. □

## Indian expatriates

SIR — The proposed creation in India of a "technology city" (*Nature* 29 September, p.350) for expatriate scientists returning to India to enable them to work in the sort of conditions they have become used to will not help in revitalizing Indian science. Science has taken gigantic strides during the past few decades mainly because of research in Europe and the United States. Unfortunately, India has not evolved a scientific culture and scientists in India are not terribly science-minded. No rationale can justify the hostile attitude of Indian scientists within India towards their countrymen working abroad. The latter have established their reputation in a highly competitive atmosphere through sheer dint of meritorious scientific research, but there is no competition among the scientists working in India.

The creation of a technology city (as I understand it) will mean establishing a scientific community totally divorced from the mainstream of Indian science. It is repeating an earlier mistake when several Institutes of Technology (IIT) were created divorced from the academic milieu of the country — the universities. Major resources were directed towards establishing these institutes, as a consequence of which Indian universities were starved of support. The new institutions could not satisfy the needs of scholarship and excellence in scientific research, while the universities, with high traditions of scholarship and learning, have been reduced to academic nothingness because of faulty educational planning.

The fact remains that when the British left India in 1947 they left behind a number of universities endowed with high reputations in scholarship and research. The universities of Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Allahabad come to mind. It may not be out of place to note that Professor Erwin Schrodinger accepted the chair of physics at Allahabad University, but was unable to take up the post because

of the Second World War. It is saddening to see the condition of academic life in these universities: academic excellence has not been sustained, and continuing decline has resulted in a demoralized academic community.

Science cannot grow and prosper in isolation. Science has advanced in the West because there has been a nucleus of people working hectically together. Such a nucleus does not exist in India. Those opposing the return of Indian scientists are afraid that they will have to re-evaluate their scientific research, which they are conscious has very little importance internationally, nor even any particular relevance for the problems of Indian society. The tragedy of Indian science is that the people who control scientific circles are scientifically most incompetent.

What is the way out? The universities or other existing research centres should be allocated a certain number of positions in addition to those that exist, to be filled by expatriates only. Such positions should have support from the government not only for the incumbents' salaries but also to create up to date research facilities. This would help create a nucleus of meritorious scientific work and might also help improve academic life. Those who are already at work would benefit from the knowledge and experience of the new incumbent, while up to date research facilities would be a bonus.

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## Pauling institute

SIR — Your article on the Linus Pauling Institute (*Nature* 303, 103; 1983) contains inaccuracies which I would like to correct.

In June 1978, when I was president, director, research professor and a trustee of the Linus Pauling Institute of Science and Medicine, Linus Pauling abruptly took various actions against me and my research work. During the succeeding four years, many of my research results on nutrition and cancer were suppressed.

The claim, attributed to Pauling in the *Nature* article, that I was awarded \$575,000 in the out-of-court settlement only out of "concern about the likely costs and trouble of a protracted hearing" is misleading.

The settlement document, which bears Pauling's signature, specifies that "\$425,000 is deemed to be in settlement of the libel and slander claims", "\$100,000 is deemed to be for reimbursement of attorney's fees and costs" and "\$50,000 is deemed to be in settlement of the contract and conversion claims". The settlement document states that none of the parties admits liability. ARTHUR B. ROBINSON  
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