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## AIDS: sharing out the spoils<sup>14</sup>

**T**HE SQUABBLE between France and the US about who discovered the AIDS virus, and who has the patent rights for kits that diagnose the virus, is becoming increasingly unseemly. On the face of it, the Americans are playing the dirtier game.

Certainly, the French are getting very angry. Their man, Luc Montagnier of the Institut Pasteur in Paris was the first to isolate the AIDS virus and he filed his patent application for a diagnostic kit in the US in December 1983. Robert Gallo, the hero of American AIDS research from the National Cancer Institute, filed his application in April 1984. He now claims that he was the first person to prove that the AIDS virus causes AIDS. Gallo's application has been granted, but Montagnier is still waiting.

Of course, with most AIDS patients currently to be found in the US, the American patent is crucial if anybody is to make any money out of the disease. Scientifically, it is difficult to understand what the dispute is about. But the whiff of money and fame has forced the interested parties into a course of action that is obstructive to the advance of medical care.

The French, on their own evidence, have attempted to arrive at a compromise with their rivals. It is some time since they made their first overtures. A proposal for discussions went unanswered by the Americans for a full month. Then the US turned them down. Now Raymond Dedonder, the director of the Institut Pasteur, has sent a second letter to the US Secretary of State for Health and Human Services. While the exchange of letters continues both Montagnier and Gallo profess a sincere wish

for a fair and amicable settlement. The dispute brings three things to mind, all of them unsavoury. First is the disturbing juxtaposition of human disease and financial gain. We all carry with us a comfortable image that altruism and self-sacrifice are the life-blood of medical science. But the world is not like that.

Everyone mentioned in both patent applications stands to make money out of the royalties (although Gallo claims he will make "not a penny" for himself). It would be odd if inventors, whether of computers, wheelchairs or diagnostic kits, were not to make money from their work. But if the impression gets out that people are dying while they share out the spoils, then the whole of medical science will suffer.

Second comes personal prestige. However much the groups of researchers on either side of the Atlantic wish to play this down, the hunger for fame affects them all. The person who licks AIDS will be hero indeed. In four days time, a committee of scientists meeting in Stockholm will decide who gets this year's Nobel prize for medicine. Sometime soon, one or other of the groups seems certain to land that prize.

Then there is national prestige. Can America really allow foreigners to take the scientific driving seat in the unravelling of a disease that is killing Americans, above all? AIDS sufferers may not care, but many American scientists and politicians undoubtedly do.

As these rows begin to be heard more loudly outside the laboratory, the political stakes can only rise. For the moment the ball is in the Americans' court. We can hope that it does not end up in a court of law. □

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