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RESEARCH RESOURCES

Assault on Viral Leukemia

If leukemia is induced by a virus, sooner or later science is going to know.

A major investment of talent and money in a task force to combat leukemia says it will be sooner, and top flight scientists across the country have been mobilized in an all out effort to unmask the virus-like particles that turn up when the blood cancer is present but elude researchers' efforts to pin them down.

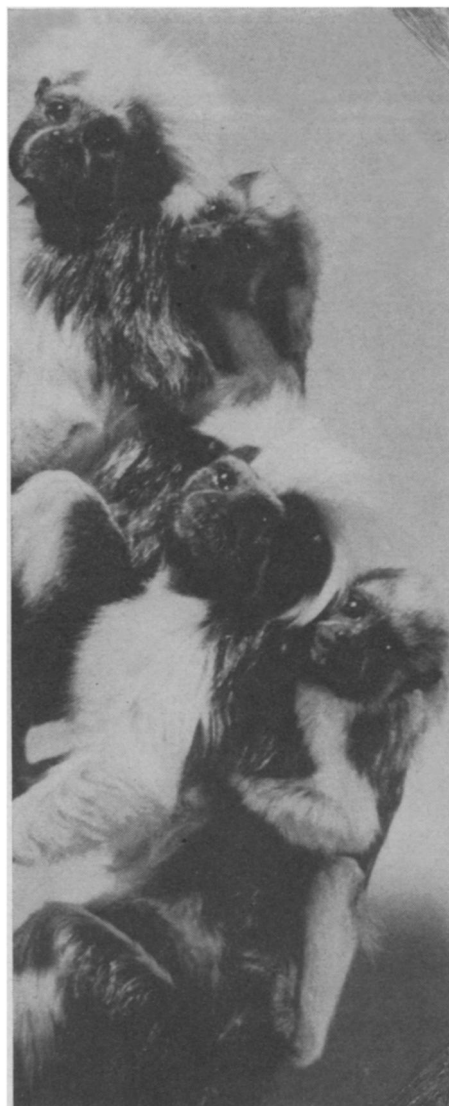
Successful transmission of leukemia in laboratory animals and strong circumstantial evidence linking animal leukemia viruses and human virus-like particles stand behind the premise that leukemia is an infectious disease and that a vaccine can be developed once its viral source is identified.

Two years ago the National Cancer Institute launched the Special Virus-Leukemia Program to sponsor the intensified virus hunt. Instead of giving separate, unrelated grants to individual scientists, the program funds the work of research teams each looking for answers to the same questions. NCI is coordinating the myriad of activities and serving as a central switchboard to keep information flowing freely between its scattered task forces.

Out of this concentrated anticancer campaign has come a forward-looking outfit called, in typical bureaucratic fashion, the Viral Resources and Repository Section of the National Cancer Institute.

Now that more scientists than ever are pursuing research along parallel lines, the demand for research's basic tools has boomed. Doctors in New York may be tracing the effect of the same viral strain in mice as are doctors in Chicago. If the two are going to compare results, and that is what they want to do, they have to be sure they are working with identical strains of both viruses and mice. If an investigator in Buffalo thinks he's identified a new type of virus, he needs a standard of comparison to be sure.

This is where Viral Resources comes into the picture. Its storehouses hold samples of animal and human viruses, and reagents that can be supplied to program participants upon request. "The viruses number in the hundreds, and we've identified many more viruses than corresponding diseases," Dr. Harry G. Steinman, Viral Resources' chief reported. "There are at least



San Diego Zoo

Cotton-topped marmoset family.

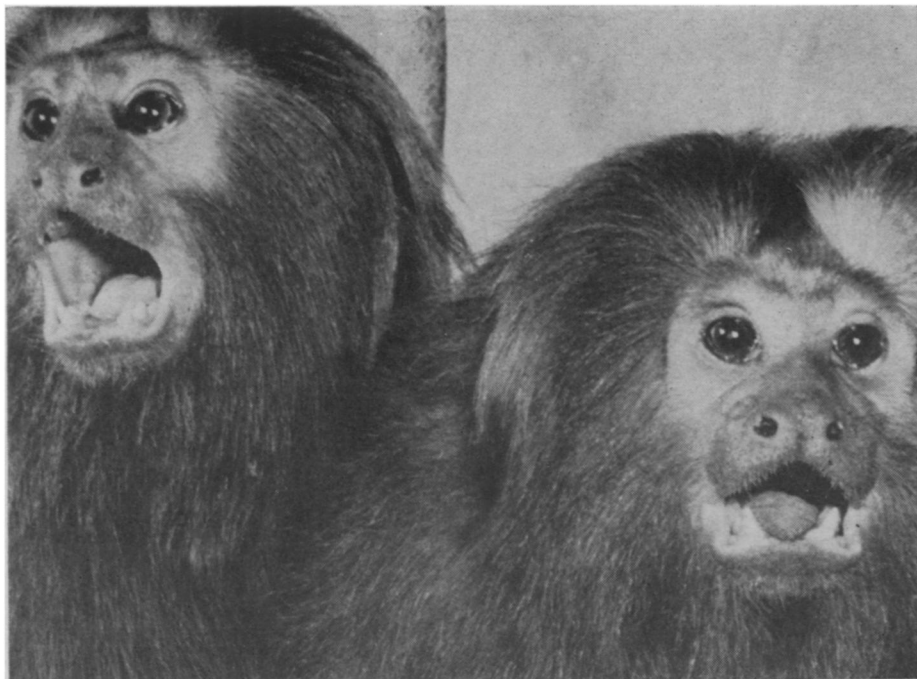
60 different types of viruses from monkeys alone," he says, "and we hope to have them all in storage as the program gets under way."

In less abundant quantities, Viral Resources supplies human tissues and laboratory animals to its field scientists.

Diseased tissues from humans are vitally important to further study because so much has already been done on model animal systems, Dr. Steinman explains, but it is extremely difficult to obtain and supply such tissue fast enough to be useful—that is, before it has time to begin disintegrating.

Laboratory animals, probably the most basic need of basic research, pre-

... Viral Leukemia



San Diego Zoo

Golden marmosets are candidates for research if they breed in captivity.

sent quite a problem to the scientific community which Dr. Steinman's team is trying to resolve by anticipating possible needs before they occur. They are looking for new species of experimental animals.

Mice, as everyone knows, are used frequently in biomedical studies. They are easy to care for, don't cost much to house, respond to dozens of disease organisms and have a comparatively short life span so if they are going to get sick and die from a virus, they do so rather quickly. But mice are not very close to men and the discrepancy between what happens biologically in mice and what happens in men is enormous.

Monkeys, on the other hand, are primates closest to man. But the incubation period for a virus in a strapping young chimp may be up to 10 years—a long time for crash program scientists to wait—and the hotel bill for these human cousins is staggering.

An Old World or rhesus monkey costs his keepers about \$250 a year. Cats run around \$180 a year, guinea pigs about \$36 and mice only \$9. Therefore, a laboratory doing monkey studies spends \$10,000 a year just for hotel services if it has an average 40 residents.

So, other animals combining the best features of mice and monkeys are being sought. At Tulane University in Louisiana, scientists supported by NCI are trying to breed tree shrews from southeast Asia, little chipmunk-like

creatures that seem promising as animal models. But the highly sensitive shrews are resisting efforts to get them to mate. They have not yet adapted to life in captivity and their captors have not learned enough about their native habits to provide satisfactory living quarters. But things may change once the shrews are happier.

Marmosets and galagos are other exotic animals that are potential candidates for the research ranks. Zoologists at the San Diego Zoo are working under a NCI grant to learn about the natural habits, biological activities and native diseases of these creatures. Knowledge of native diseases is fundamental to research efforts to preclude the possibility of thinking a disease had been induced in the laboratory when it is actually something quite common to a particular species naturally.

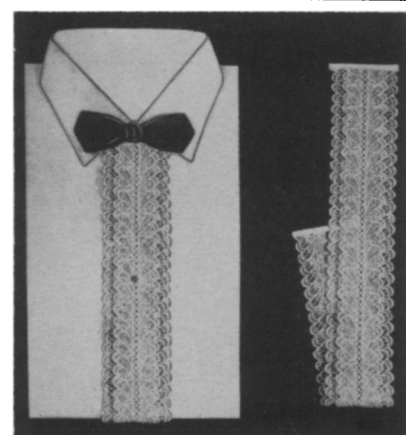
Building stockpiles of research materials and anticipating research demands are vital to the efficient operation of this massive war on leukemia. A colony of 40 animals may be valuable to one researcher in one lab, but is inconsequential when teams of researchers in a number of labs are all pursuing the same thing. If someone discovers a link between leukemia viruses in shrews and virus-like particles in humans, the whole task force is going to want shrews—in a hurry. Whatever the need, Viral Resources is beginning now to anticipate and meet it, so that when success is imminent, science won't be caught short.

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