

## Stealing Indigenous Genes

# Genome Project Places Indigenous Peoples at Risk

A band of molecular anthropologists are planning to collect samples from the hair roots, cheeks and blood of 722 "endangered" Indigenous peoples scattered throughout the globe to immortalize their genetic make-up and possibly turn a profit.

A draft report from the second Human Genome diversity Workshop held at Penn State University on October 29-31, 1992 refers to Indigenous people as "Isolates of Historic Interest (IHI's), because they represent groups that should be sampled before they disappear as integral units so that their role in human history can be preserved."

By recording gene codes the plan's participants hope to find unique genes which can be used to cure diseases, which they will patent and make millions.

The plan is being advanced by the Human Genome Diversity Project, an informal consortium of universities in North America and Europe backed by the U.S. National Institute of Health (NIH) as part of the Human Genome Organization (HUGO). HUGO is the multinational, multi-billion dollar initiative to map the human genetic structure.

Part of the plan is to leave a duplicate sample of the DNA of each Indigenous community with their national governments or regional institutions. Access to an IHI's complete genetic make-up makes it theoretically possible to devise cheap and targeted biological weapons trained solely on that community. Human rights violations against Indigenous peoples, by their own governments and/or other governments within their region, is a major cause of their "physical extinction".

Permanent samples of human genetic material are invaluable to the Human Genome Project and to medical research. Under

U.S. law, any products or processes derived from the unique collection will be patentable.

The commercial profit in Indigenous germplasm was brought home to pharmaceutical companies earlier this year when thirty citizens of Limone, an isolated Italian community, were discovered to have a unique gene that codes against many forms of cardiovascular disease. Swedish and Swiss pharmaceutical companies, as well as the University of Milan, have since swarmed over the townspeople, taking blood and other samples and applying for patents. If the gene can be turned into a marketable drug the profits will be tremendous. Will Indigenous peoples have a share in such profits?

The members of the Human Genome Diversity Project estimate that an initial five year sweep of relatively accessible populations will cost between \$23 million and \$35 million and will allow sampling from 10,000 to 15,000 human specimens. White blood cells from each person will be "immortalized" at the American Type Culture Collection in Rockville, Maryland. Human blood can only survive 48 hours outside of storage so samples collected will have to be air-lifted immediately. "One person can bleed 50 people and get to the airport in one day," the report estimates.

The Indigenous Peoples and Health Workshop held in Winnipeg, Canada April 13-18, 1993, which was organized by the Pan American Health Organization (see article page 11), passed a resolution criticizing the Genome project. The resolution states:

This is yet another example of research being done on Indigenous people without their consent and without all relevant information being provided to them.

The consequences of this research have not been fully explored nationally, inter-



## Pan American Health Organization Conference on Indigenous Health

The first conference ever sponsored by the Pan American Health Organization that focused exclusively on Indigenous peoples health issues was held from April 13 - 18 in Villa Maria, Winnipeg Canada. Forty Indigenous delegates from South, Meso and North America as well as Canadian government and non-governmental representatives attended the Indigenous Peoples & Health Workshop '93 "in hopes of launching a dialogue on the health status of Indigenous peoples."

Presentations, seminars and discussions addressed the gravity of the health crisis in Native communities, covering topics ranging from the dearth of health services and facilities in Native communities, to the significant role of traditional Indigenous medicine, to the ominous Human Genome Development Project. Poverty, oppression and lack of self-determination were seen to be the pri-

### *Genome continued*

nationally, or in consultation with Indigenous people.

This type of research will have a negative impact on future health programs and projects in Indigenous communities, by undermining Indigenous peoples' trust in the medical and health professions.

Source: Rural Advancement Foundation International

For more information contact SAIC or:

Rural Advancement  
Foundation International  
71 Bank Street, Suite 504  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5N2  
Canada  
Tel: 613-567-6880  
Fax: 613-567-6884

mary culprits of the alarming health situation confronting Indigenous peoples.

In light of the crisis, a recommendation to declare a state of emergency in specific communities and populations was put forth. Systematic community participation in defining and implementing health policies was regarded as crucial for achieving positive results. The necessity of pursuing ongoing efforts to defend Indigenous lands, improve nutrition and housing, prevent environmental pollution, and legalize Indigenous medicine and practices was discussed at length.

As a result of this conference, a commission of Indigenous delegates, working in conjunction with PAHO to promote Indigenous health issues on local, national and international levels is being established. In addition, an international task force dedicated to ensuring that Indigenous health issues find a place on the agendas of any meetings pertaining to Native peoples is planned, as well as an information network to educate and update Native communities on relevant issues and new developments concerning health.



Delegates to the PAHO conference from left to right: Rosa Baldizón, Maya (Guatemala); Rosa García, Purepecha (México); Carmen Pereira, Mojeña (Bolivia); Yolanda Nahuelcheo, Mapuche (Chile); and Gilberta Batz, Maya (Guatemala)

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