

Blood Bank Week

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF BLOOD BANKS

HEPATITIS NON-A, NON-B VIRUS DISCOVERED

Researchers at Chiron Corp. announced Tuesday that they have isolated and cloned proteins from the virus responsible for non-A, non-B hepatitis. If true, this discovery is a major breakthrough for transfusion medicine because 90 to 95 percent of the patients with post-transfusion hepatitis are considered to be infected with the non-A, non-B strain.

Chiron Corp. of Emeryville, CA, is submitting a screening test (ELISA) to detect antibodies to the viral particles, to the Food and Drug Administration for approval. The test, if approved, could prevent patients from receiving infected blood and help reduce the amount of blood discarded, possibly eliminating the need for the two surrogate tests currently used, ALT and anti-HBc.

Chiron hopes to have the test available for clinical trials by the end of this year. If positive results are obtained the test might be available to blood banks the next year, according to the May 11 issue of the *New York Times*. The test kit will be marketed by Ortho Diagnostic Systems, a unit of Johnson and Johnson. The testing market is estimated at \$85 million annually in the U.S. In several years, this work could also lead to a vaccine against the disease. Vaccine research will be performed by Biocine Co., a Chiron joint venture with Ciba-Geigy Corp., according to the May 11 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Many scientists have tried to isolate this virus for more than twenty years, but were unsuccessful because of the small amount of viral particles available in infected patients and because the virus will not grow in cell culture. By using DNA cloning techniques the researchers at Chiron produced significant quantities of the virus in bacteria. The protein produced by the bacteria identified human antibodies to the virus and is believed to be on the outside of the viral coat.

The *Times* quoted Harvey J. Alter, MD, chief of the immunology section of the department of transfusion medicine at the National Institutes of Health and a member of the AABB's Transfusion Transmitted Diseases Committee, as saying that the identification of the non-A, non-B hepatitis protein is "what we've been looking for for 10 years... one has to be skeptical but the data I've seen looks very good."

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Because Chiron has not yet published its results some skepticism remains about their findings. Michael Houghton, PhD, Qui-Lim Choo, PhD, George Kuo, PhD and Amy Weiner, PhD, are credited with the finding. A paper is in progress, according to a Chiron spokesperson. Other companies previously claiming to have identified the virus were proven incorrect.

Chiron researchers previously cloned and expressed proteins from hepatitis A and developed recombinant DNA technology used for a vaccine against hepatitis B.

Health experts agree that further testing still needs to be performed because the protein identified may be one of several capable of causing non-A, non-B hepatitis.

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AMCZ CHERNOFF JOINS ABBB STAFF TO HEAD SCIENTIFIC AFFAIRS

Amoz Chernoff, MD, former director of the Division of Blood Diseases and Resources of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, has joined the staff of the ABBB as associate executive director for scientific affairs. Chernoff retired from his federal government position on March 30, and began with the ABBB on May 3.

In the new position, Chernoff will be concerned with helping to identify future scientific directions for the ABBB and in assisting members of the Association and staff in formulating and interpreting position papers, policy statements and data. He will provide a valuable resource to those representing the Association in interactions with the general public, with the press and with legislative and regulatory bodies. Chernoff's expertise in managing grant and contract programs at the NIH, as well as his interest in strategic scientific planning, will be of particular importance for members of the ABBB as they focus their energies on a variety of new directions for transfusion medicine. As part of his duties he will also supervise several established programs of the ABBB, including Inspection and Accreditation Programs, Certification Programs, and others.

"The ABBB is proud to have such an esteemed scientist join its staff," said Gilbert Clark, ABBB executive director. "Amoz Chernoff's expertise will expand the ABBB's abilities in the scientific and technical areas. In particular, we will be able to expand our efforts in data collection. There is a tremendous need in transfusion medicine for accurate and up-to-date information on blood banking practices."

Chernoff was director of DBDR at NHLBI from 1979 until his retirement this year. Prior to that appointment, he was associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at the Center for Health Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He served as medical director for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, Atlanta, Georgia, from 1975-1977 and has been on the faculty of medicine at Duke University, Washington University and the University of Tennessee.