

# TOUCHING BASE

QUESTIONS? THOUGHTS? IDEAS?  
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## Mutant of the Month

How do the eyes map to the brain to achieve binocular vision? November's Mutant of the Month, the achiasmatic black Belgian Sheepdog (*Nature* 367, 637–639; 1994), provides a natural situation in which to test the hypotheses that have exercised such thinkers as Newton, Descartes and Cajal. Neurons projecting from each eye cross over the midline and project to a subcortical relay, the lateral geniculate nucleus, forming a distinct layer adjacent to—and congruent with—the direct projections of the other eye on that side. The achiasmatic dog has two non-congruent mirror-image maps on each side. Although the cortex seems to be able to compensate to some extent for this uncrossed wiring, the oculomotor signals are confused, resulting in nystagmus, an oscillatory motion of the animal's eyeballs.



Before and after treatment

Photo courtesy of L. Dell'Osso

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## Annual Nobel Haiku

How the nose knows rose  
And which sense sends scents to brain  
Smells like Nobel Prize

## National genotyping center

The US National Institutes of Health and the Broad Institute of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University are teaming up to deliver affordable, high-throughput SNP genotyping services to US-based researchers. The new center, funded with \$14 million over 5 years, will offer a menu of services based on a variety of genotyping platforms. In addition to genotyping services, the center will offer integrated SNP selection, data management and analytical tools to aid researchers in the design and interpretation of their studies. Similar genotyping centers already exist in several European and Asian countries, but this is the first time that such an initiative has been launched in the US. The center's first genotyping experiments are scheduled to begin early in 2005. Further details regarding the application process will be posted on the Broad Institute's website (<http://www.broad.mit.edu>) later this fall.

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*Touching Base* written by Myles Axton, Orli Bahcall and Kyle Vogan

## Networking epigenomic excellence

Can superior communication and collegial collaboration establish an edge against competition with extensive mobility, a common language and lots of cash on its side? Last month, in the abbey at Brno where Mendel discovered the principles of genetics, representatives of more than 60 European labs met to maximize their competitiveness in epigenetics research with the aid of a grant of 12.5 million euros from the European Union (EU). This network, coordinated by Thomas Jenuwein and colleagues, is unusual among EU networks in that, in addition to being able to spend a quarter of their grant on research, it has been able to use another quarter of the grant to fund competitive awards for recently independent researchers through the NET program. Thus they fulfill their mission to extend the network throughout the EU (<http://www.epigenome-noe.net>). If long-term excellence is to be encouraged, the EU will have to build some excellent institutes or at the very least incorporate some form of competitive renewal into its next funding Framework, to reward researchers for the work achieved under the present grants.

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Cartoon by Sean Taverna

*"Sometimes it skips a few generations."*

## Virtually there

The Fourth Virtual Conference on Genomics and Bioinformatics was held on 21–24 September 2004 in its usual location—online. More than 1,000 participants from 29 countries met in 119 conferences rooms worldwide to discuss the latest developments in postgenomic technologies. With nearly half of registered participants from developing countries, the meeting accomplished a key objective of the sponsoring company, Orion Integrated Biosciences: to allow increased access to high-level scientific discussions, transcending both geographical and economic barriers usually associated with attending international conferences. The online venue, in which participating sites broadcast simultaneously (or nearly so, barring technical difficulties) using access-grid and real-time video streaming, allowed discussions in which speakers could respond to questions posed from other sites. Increased accessibility to scientists worldwide is particularly important in these areas of bioinformatics research, which draw on multidisciplinary and rapidly changing fields. Too often, those with limited travel budgets, including young scientists and those from developing countries, are under-represented at these meetings and may face challenges in realizing the benefits of the latest technologies and contributing their own research. Still, there are some things best done in person, especially the exchange of ideas and budding collaborations that are fostered at the local pub. Until there is a way to replicate such an environment online, scientists will continue to seek out the personal touch of attending conferences.

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