EDITORIAL

# Science diplomacy with Cuba

Over a century ago, interactions between a Cuban scientist, Carlos Finlay, and a U.S. scientist, Jesse Lazear, led to an understanding of the role of the mosquito in transmitting yellow fever and to the development of effective countermeasures. Today, new infectious diseases confront both Cuba and the United States, but a longstanding diplomatic breach between the two nations now makes such valuable joint research more complicated, if not impossible. It is time for both governments to reconsider the rules that stand in the way of scientific collaboration, before a potentially deadly outbreak spreads through both countries and beyond. In particular, the U.S. government can make a relatively straightforward change to rules that would make collaboration much easier.

The official relationship between Cuba and the United States has been frozen for over half a century, restricting scientific cooperation in many fields. However, a lack of collaboration in the public health arena poses special concerns. Cuba is only 90 miles from the United States and is the destination of over half a million U.S. citizens, many of whom are visiting relatives. Such interactions are welcome and important, but they also provide an avenue for the unintentional spread of infectious diseases. Well-known tropical diseases, such as dengue fever, and newly emerging threats, such as chikungunya, are now spreading at an alarming rate in the Caribbean and pose serious threats to both travelers and residents alike. There are already reports of these diseases in the United States. Currently, no commercial vaccines or drugs are available for treating either dread disease.

Working together more closely would allow scientists from Cuba and the United States to better share data, identify and monitor outbreaks of infectious disease, and develop more coherent responses. However, limited communication capacities, combined with regulations that make scientific meetings difficult, complicate efforts to build a more seamless discourse between U.S. and Cuban scientists. It is in both countries' national interests to change this. The general license under the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Cuban Assets Control Regulations, which presently permits nongovernmental U.S. scientists to travel to Cuba to conduct research, could be expanded to allow joint organization of scientific workshops and meetings.

Earlier this year, a group of U.S. scientists visited Havana under the auspices of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the Cuban Academy of Sciences. They met with many leaders of the Cuban scientific community and visited some research facilities. The two organizations signed an agreement to cooperate that focuses on four areas: infectious disease, cancer, neurological and neurodegenerative disease, and resistance to antimicrobial drugs. But this plan of action rests in part on making it easier for U.S. scientists to get government licenses for their work in Cuba.

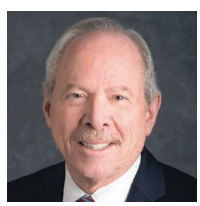
*"...a single policy change will go a long way to ensure a more robust science relationship with great mutual benefit."*

This visit was followed by a meeting last month in Washington, DC, of U.S. and Cuban marine scientists to discuss drafting an agreement to collaborate in ocean science research and conservation. A key part of that agreement is changing the U.S. general license for attending and organizing scientific conferences.

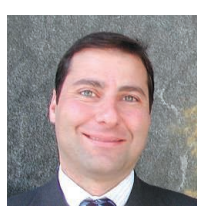
These are examples of a growing movement of "science diplomacy," a term that often seems to mean signing an agreement to cooperate. But to be effective, it must focus on deeds. Science diplomacy can facilitate addressing science-based questions whose answers are impeded because political relationships limit official interactions between the countries. There is perhaps no better modern example of this than the U.S.-Cuba relationship, where a single policy change will go a long way to ensure a more robust science relationship with great mutual benefit.

**– Gerald R. Fink, Alan I. Leshner, Vaughan C. Turekian**


*Gerald R. Fink is president of AAAS and a professor at the Whitehead Institute of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA. E-mail: gfink@wi.mit.edu*



*Alan I. Leshner is chief executive officer of AAAS and executive publisher of* Science. *E-mail: aleshner@aaas.org*



*Vaughan C. Turekian is chief international officer of AAAS and director of the AAAS Center for Science Diplomacy. E-mail: vturekia@aaas.org*


10.1126/science.1256312

# Science diplomacy with Cuba

Gerald R. Fink, Alan I. Leshner and Vaughan C. Turekian

*Science* **344** (6188), 1065.
DOI: 10.1126/science.1256312