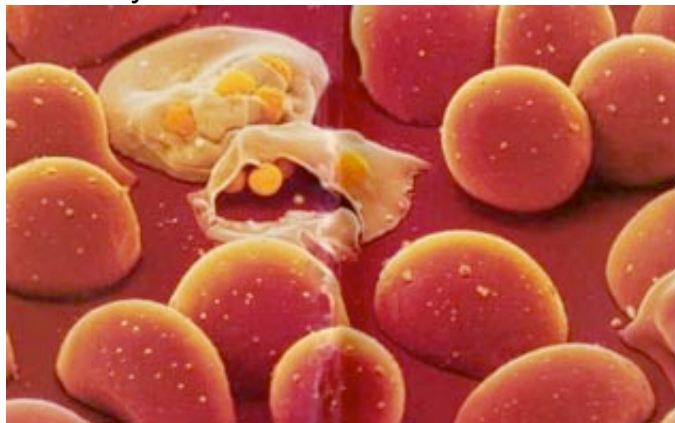


THE SCOTSMAN
Fri 6 May 2005



Malaria cells

Picture: Stephen Mansfield

Scots scientists warn of new malaria strain

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MALARIA parasites are involved in a furious arms race against each other which could lead to the development of a deadly new strain, Edinburgh University scientists have discovered.

A study, by Professor Andrew Read, found the most aggressive of the single-celled organisms which cause malaria were able to beat "nicer" strains to food in the host, giving them a massive evolutionary advantage.

Prof Read said this meant that people with malaria should be protected from being infected again, using better medical care, mosquito nets and improved housing, not only for their own benefit but to reduce the evolutionary competition. He warned global warming might increase the prevalence of malaria, creating more competition and more virulent strains of the disease.

Thousands of Britons who travel abroad get malaria and about 1 per cent die because they contract the worst kind.

Prof Read said: "What happens just now is like the worst outcome of an unregulated free market, with the nastiest parasites crushing the nice guys.

"Parasites kill us, not because it's us against them, but because it's them against them.

"We have shown that such competition favours parasites that make hosts sicker.

"Parasitic organisms could, like humans, make their world much better by co-operating to look after the common resource - us. But ... selfish parasites, aggressively grabbing what we have to offer, do better."

Malaria parasites basically eat red blood cells and the ones that attack the fastest survive at the expense of slower varieties.



Prof Read said there was probably an equilibrium in malaria virulence at the moment. But he warned: "If malaria transmission went up as a result of global climate change ... competition would increase and we would argue that would lead to enhanced virulence."

This article: <http://news.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=485852005>

Last updated: 06-May-05 01:16 GMT

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