

A Rondelay (Without Cadenza) By The Virion Of Influenza

Edwin D. Kilbourne

Now you have me—sucrose-banded,
 Enveloped and negative-stranded
 Spiked and cleaved and slightly dented
 Into pieces eight, segmented—
 Without mercy I've been strained
 Through filters—then been bromelained, and
 Torn apart by each detergent
 With a haste unseemly, urgent—
 All my helices displayed
 Just to show you how I'm made.
 My polypeptides have been mapped
 My hemagglutinin unwrapped—
 All my sequences are clear—
 All the way from Arg to Ser.
 With techniques sharp and newly honed
 My very genes have now been cloned—
 Transplanted to an alien host
 Wherein my evanescent ghost
 As solitary as an elf
 Has managed to express myself.
 And scientists have labored nights
 To probe my antigenic sites
 Some fresh from school with new diplomas
 (Aided by their hybridomas)
 Scramble up trimeric slopes
 Counting all my epitopes

And every Ph.D. or pupil
 Utterly devoid of scruple
 Mates me with complete abandon—
 Asks, then, why my genes are random
 Can I kiss and never tell
 When genotyped upon a gel?
 Which, if inspected with acuity
 Will document my promiscuity—
 Must you write, in fat reports
 How flagrantly I reassort?
 No boundaries have my misbehavin'
 Horsey set or duck or avian—
 In other moments less sublime
 You've put my perils before swine!
 And yet in 1981
 Despite the work that has been done
 The epidemics come and go
 As regular as winter snow.
 And people cough and people die
 And all of you still wonder why.
 I'm so perverse and ever mutable
 And so eternally unscrutable.
 But think about just what you'd do
 If there were really
 No more flu!

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Dr Kilbourne has spent most of his professional lifetime, beginning in 1948, on the study of influenza. During his tenure at five medical institutions, he has contributed particularly to discoveries that have facilitated vaccine development. As an avocation, he has published light verse and essays that have appeared in a number of nonmedical periodicals, including Saturday Review; some of his works have been collected recently in book form in *Strategies of Sex*. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the Association of American Physicians, and the American Philosophical Society, among other honorary societies. He may be contacted by email: ekilbourne@snet.net