

THE DISCOVERY OF ISOPROPYL CYANIDE IN INTERSTELLAR SPACE

The recent discovery of an interstellar molecule, isopropyl cyanide, C_3H_7CN with a branched carbon structure has been much publicized and hailed as evidence for the beginnings of life in interstellar space. Whilst the researchers should be congratulated for the detection of a new class of interstellar organic molecule, arguing a case for the emergence of life on this basis is premature. The presence of branched structures is a common feature of molecules such as amino acids, which are the building blocks of proteins; but they are also present in the metabolites of biology and in their degradation products. It is of interest that the group of organic cyanides (R-CN) are produced in many organisms including algae, fungi and plants, and in some cases produced as defensive metabolites^{1,2}.

In the absence of any evidence that the transition from non-life to life takes place readily and inevitably against all the odds, it would be my preference to argue that the new interstellar molecule simply adds to the storehouse of degradation products of biology in the dust clouds of space.

Chandra Wickramasinghe

Buckingham Centre for Astrobiology, Buckingham, UK;

Institute for the Study of Panspermia and Astroeconomics, Gifu, Japan;

University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya Sri Lanka

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