

Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Cold Unit Takes a Powder

One of Britain's least known vacation destinations closed its doors for the last time a week ago: the Medical Research Council's Common Cold Unit is no more. Since 1946 more than 20,000 volunteers have visited the unit in Salisbury, near Stonehenge, each spending about 10 days there. It wasn't lavish, but it was a rest—if you didn't mind the risk of catching a cold.

Such holidays have provided scientists with vast amounts of information. "Our basic understanding of the cold has been transformed beyond all recognition," says David Tyrrell, retiring director of the unit. But he admits, "we still can't do much about it."

When the unit opened, its first task was to establish just what causes a cold. "People still weren't convinced it was a virus," Tyrrell says. Volunteers, inoculated with filtered nose washings, helped nail down the virus theory. Later, by sitting around in damp clothes before the inoculation, they disproved the conventional wisdom that getting chilled gives you a cold.

The unit also showed that many viruses can cause colds. First to be fingered, in the 1950s, were the rhinoviruses. The '60s saw the coronaviruses, later followed by other culprits, all with somewhat different symptoms.

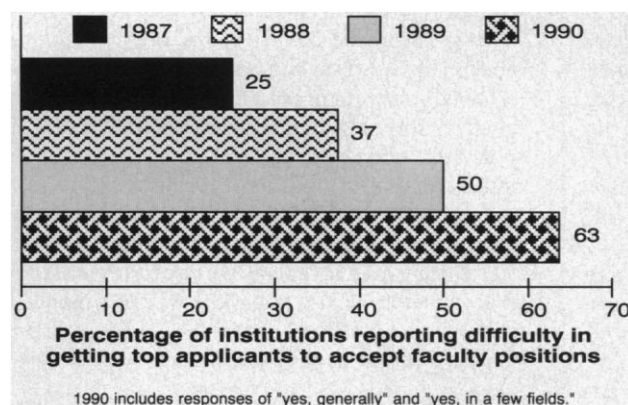
What about a cure? Tyrrell says his unit did try for a vaccine, but realized there were too many viruses involved. The first trials of genetically engineered interferon—showing that it did prevent colds—were carried out at the Common Cold Unit. Since then, working with pharmaceutical companies around the world, the unit has identified other compounds—some work by blocking the activity of a virus and

Sellers' Market Looms for Professors

Early signs of the long-heralded faculty crunch are now upon us, according to the American Council on Education's latest report on "Campus Trends."*

Concern over faculty staffing has "risen dramatically" among the 364 colleges and universities in the survey and is now second only to money worries, according to the ACE. Almost two-thirds of the institutions reported it is taking longer to find qualified people to fill openings, although "as of now, problems are still mainly confined to certain high-demand fields."

Many institutions are responding to the problem by raising salaries, offering job assistance to spouses, and moving part-time faculty to full-time positions. "The outlook is that future competition for faculty appointments will be a significant, continuing source of financial pressure on colleges and universities."



* Copies are available from the Division of Policy Analysis and Research, ACE, 1 Dupont Circle NW, Washington, DC 20036-1193, at \$10 for members, \$13 for non-members.

others by preventing the onset of symptoms. But, Tyrrell says, you have to take them before the first snuffle. "None is powerful enough to prevent a cold once it has started."

So why has the MRC decided to close the unit? Its aging buildings are in a sorry state and the MRC, with its shrinking budget, prefers to support new fields of research. "The only way they can do that is by closing units," says Tyrrell, "and the least unpleasant time to do so is when the director retires."

Good Times for Santa Fe Think Tank

The study of complex phenomena ranging from the weather to the nuclear family has gotten a boost with two recent grants to the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, a private organization that aspires to the cutting edge of interdisciplinary research and education on

"complex systems."

This month SFI received a 3-year grant of \$1.5 million from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to support faculty salaries and the development of nationwide research networks in diverse areas including theoretical immunology and the global economy.

The institute has also received a grant of \$300,000 from the Maxwell Foundation in London to establish a "Robert Maxwell Professorship in the Sciences of Complexity." Maxwell is a flamboyant and aggressive multimillionaire—known in the publishing world as "the bouncing Czech"—who runs Maxwell Communications Corp., which owns Macmillan and Pergamon Press. The first occupants of his chair will be Nobel Laureate Murray Gell-Mann, professor of physics at the California Institute of Technology, and John Holland, University of Michigan professor of computer science and

psychology, who will occupy the chair on a rotating basis during the next academic year.

SFI, founded in 1984 by Los Alamos chemist George A. Cowan, has a budget of \$2 million and a small in-house staff, as well as an international "external faculty" of about 30 scientists.

DOE Delays Reporting the Cost of the SSC

The Department of Energy is having trouble coming up with a new cost estimate for the Superconducting Super Collider. It had planned to release its "hard numbers" estimate last Friday (*Science*, 17 August, p. 731), but suddenly begged off on Thursday afternoon and scheduled a new estimate for 7 September. One reason: DOE officials have been busy dealing with oil price fluctuations since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. But the department is also apparently having difficulty reconciling cost estimates from four different panels. Three estimates are clustered between \$7.8 billion and \$8.9 billion, but DOE's Independent Cost Estimating group is reported to have come up with a figure of \$11.7 billion.

Before the ICE estimate came in, DOE officials said the varying estimates differed only in contingency fees, not in the cost of the collider's equipment. Now, however, spokesmen are mum about the implications of the ICE figure—and, for that matter, the ICE figure itself. For now, their only advice is: wait and see.

Harvard Trades Debt for Scholars

You've heard of debt-for-nature swaps. Now, thanks to the perversities of international finance, both Ecuador and Harvard University stand to benefit from a new twist on the old concept—a debt-for-scholarship swap.

The agreement between the university and the newly estab-