

Italians Cry Foul Over Potential EMBL Head

Attempts to find a new director-general for the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, Germany, have hit a major snag: The Italian government wants EMBL's governing council to give the leading candidate the boot because of what the Italians view as a potential conflict of interest.

Just before Christmas, Greek developmental geneticist Fotis Kafatos emerged as the favored candidate to replace Lennart Philipson, the Swedish molecular biologist who will step down in April (*Science*, 18 December 1992, p. 1871). But the Italian government is now threatening to withdraw from Europe's only

truly multinational molecular biology center—and deprive the lab of \$6.5 million a year, or about 12% of its funding—if EMBL's council fails to address its concerns satisfactorily.

Italian officials have found no blemishes on Kafatos' track record as a Harvard professor and as director of the Institute of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology in Herakleion, Crete. But they argue that Kafatos is poised to embroil himself in charges of conflict of interest: Kafatos has said that he intends to continue to oversee some research at the Herakleion lab—which is funded by the Greek government—while heading EMBL, of which Greece is a member. "Italy is not going to accept it," Gerardo Carante,

Italy's delegate to the EMBL council, told *Science*.

Kafatos declined to comment. But some sources say that the Italian government may be trying to revive the candidacy of an Italian scientist—Glaucio Tocchini Valentini, director of the Italian National Research Council's Institute of Cell Biology in Rome—whom Kafatos appears to have edged out for the top EMBL post.

EMBL officials now are worried that Italy's apparent resolve to stymie Kafatos' appointment, coupled with EMBL's need for Italian funding, could result in a deadlock when the lab's council meets on 9 March to agree on Philipson's successor. And that, they say, could end up leaving EMBL leaderless for months.

NIH Panics Over AIDS 'Manhattan Project'

When Bill Clinton promised a "Manhattan Project for AIDS" on the campaign trail, he received plenty of praise. But now Congress has taken up the idea, and suddenly officials at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have become alarmed at the way Congress wants to organize the effort.

NIH institute directors first caught wind of trouble last week, when Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) introduced a bill that would shift overarching control of AIDS research from the individual NIH institutes to a beefed-up Office of AIDS Research (OAR) within NIH. Partly to satisfy demands of AIDS activists, the legislation would elevate the OAR to a sort of "AIDS central" with the power to distribute the NIH AIDS budget as it sees fit. To NIH officials that looks like a \$1 billion power shift, with activists gaining influence over NIH research and NIH's management becoming further Balkanized.

Adding to the headache for NIH: A vote on the bill is expected in the full Senate by 1 February. In an emergency meeting late last week, the NIH institute directors drafted a memo to new Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, urging her to fight the bill. The directors complain that it would add a layer of unnecessary bureaucracy. And some AIDS researchers agree: Howard Temin of the University of Wisconsin says activists are right to be frustrated by the lack of an effective therapy or vaccine, "but the problem is not organizational—it's scientific."

As *Science* went to press, NIH officials could breathe easier: A weekend meeting with Senate staff and AIDS activists forged a compromise of sorts. The latest version of the bill now calls for the OAR to control only new and competing NIH grants, which will phase in its control of the AIDS budget over several years. NIH officials would rather have no change, but they at least have a chance to forge a better compromise when the House takes up the bill later this year.

WHOI Slips Into \$14 Million Hole

A government shark may soon take a bite out of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI). The respected research center on Cape Cod may have to return to the U.S. government more than \$14 million—about 15% of its 1993 operating budget.

That steep figure, which WHOI director Craig Dorman announced at a recent budget talk to scientists and staff, results from a routine federal audit done for the years 1987 to 1990 at the request of the Office of Naval Research (ONR), which oversees WHOI. The auditors recently told ONR that, among other things, WHOI funneled too much government money into its pension fund and paid staff for time when records show they weren't actually working.

But Dorman said that WHOI has challenged the validity of the findings. For example, he explained, the contested pension money—more than \$7 million—was legitimately used to endow the fund fully. While ONR has yet to make a final ruling, Dorman says that the agency seems to have accepted WHOI's explanation.

Then there were the discrepancies between the time WHOI

scientists billed and their calendars. WHOI officials maintain that the errors stem from poor bookkeeping, coupled with the fact that the scientists don't take this chore seriously. ONR has yet

to respond to that defense. But in the meantime, WHOI officials have thought of one way to improve bookkeeping: They plan to ask ONR to allow the institute to eliminate timecards.

Heavenly Name Dropping

In these days of tight funding, scientists are searching for ingenious ways to sell their work to the public and to potential grant sources. One technique to come into vogue is a reprise of a centuries-old method of adding authority to research: Say you're looking for (or finding) God.

In the beginning there was astronomer George Smoot, who triggered an avalanche of press coverage last fall when he compared his discovery of fluctuations in the cosmic microwave background to "seeing God." Now particle physicist Leon Lederman is following in Smoot's footsteps with his new book, *The God Particle*. In it, Lederman talks about the theoretical Higgs particle, which physicists consider the Holy Grail of the proposed \$8 billion Superconducting Super Collider.

Questioned about his theological intentions, Lederman says he was only being whimsical when he thought up the title. But not everyone is amused. After Lederman gave a speech on the book earlier this month at the Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., audience members questioned what the Higgs particle had to do with God. "I didn't really mean God," replied Lederman. He explained that his use of the word "God" symbolizes "everything we don't understand yet." With that definition, expect more scientists to jump on the God bandwagon.

