RANDOM SAMPLES

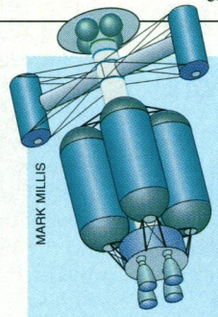
edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

New AIDS Research Center to Open

When the Gladstone Institute of Virology and Immunology officially opens its doors on 19 April, it will become one of the best-funded centers devoted to AIDS research in the United States. Located on the grounds of San Francisco General Hospital, which has been at the vanguard of AIDS research since the beginning of the epidemic, the institute will feature laboratories specializing in HIV replication, structural biology, entry and assembly, pathogenesis, and molecular immunology. "We're trying to assemble people who have interests in HIV and AIDS from very different perspectives," says Warner Greene, the institute's director. "We hope to achieve a sum that's greater than the parts."

Backed by a scientific advisory board that includes Nobel laureates David Baltimore, J. Michael Bishop, and Harold Varmus—and promoted by a slick public relations campaign—the institute sprang from a $12 million appropriation that the state of California made for what Varmus calls the "enviable" and "magnificent" facilities. The estate of shopping-mall mogul J. David Gladstone, which already funds a cardiovascular institute on the hospital grounds, came in later with a $28 million commitment. With another $4 million chipped in by the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), the institute currently has a $5.6 million annual research budget that will grow to $7.4 million by 1996.

Except for director Greene, a former investigator at Duke University and the National Cancer Institute who is best known for his work on T cell activation and growth, the institute's lab chiefs are relatively junior researchers recruited from laboratories across the United States. Most have just completed postdocs and all are now also assistant professors at UCSF. Though the institute currently has only 24 scientists, it expects to double that number and is actively recruiting new hires.



Vision 21's logo. Interplanetary spacecraft.

NASA Rounds Up Cyberspace Cowboys

Why did federal scientists and technogeeks gather in Cleveland last week under the banner of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration? No, they weren't trying to come up with a new justification for the space station. They were meeting at NASA's Lewis Research Center for Earth's first scientific conference on "cyberspace," a term coined by science fiction writer William Gibson to describe the realm envisioned where mind and computer chip embrace. To access cyberspace, people would use a kind of electrode to connect their brains directly to computer networks.

Cosponsored by the Ohio Aerospace Institute, the conference was billed as a way to "explore visions of applying cyberspace, virtual reality, and interdisciplinary science to the topics of space propulsion, power, and communication." (Virtual reality refers to a set of computer-generated sensations that mimic real events.) Masterminding the meeting was Vision-21, a group of NASA-Lewis scientists founded 5 years ago "to promote speculative thinking," says member Geoffrey Landis, an engineer with Sverdrup Technology Inc., a Lewis-based contractor.

Conference speakers added some depth to the cyberspace landscape. For example, NASA's John Dalton spoke on potential ways to visualize, in three-dimensional cyberspace, the 2 trillion bytes of climate data per day expected from the Earth Observing System satellites scheduled for launch later this decade. Also on the program: a session on how aspiring "interface cowboys" might develop a sixth sense to help orient them in cyberspace.

Biologists Press for Environment Agency

Call them dreamers if you like, but in a year when even the NIH budget is likely to face rough going in Congress, around 5000 scientists and educators are pushing for the creation of a new National Institute for the Environment (NIE). Last week, the Washington, D.C.-based Committee for the National Institutes for the Environment unveiled its first formal proposal for an NIE: a federal agency with three intramural centers (for environmental assessment; a national library; and education and training) and three extramural research directorates on environmental systems, resources, and sustainability.

The idea for such an entity has been simmering ever since biologists Stephen Hubble of Princeton and Henry Howe of the University of Illinois in Chicago "cooked it up over dinner at Henry's," as Hubble puts it, one night 3 years ago. The duo originally envisioned six institutes modeled on NIH, but their notion has been modified. Nevertheless, the two are excited about the proposal's prospects: "None of us ever imagined that it would generate the national excitement that it has done," said Hubble at a 30 March press conference in Washington.

He's right in part: The thrust has been endorsed by several score scientific societies. Nonetheless, the institute—which its designers estimate would need $500 million a year for starters—may be hard to sell to Congress. The NIE people say their dream would fill yawning gaps in research, training, and information dissemination, but skeptics wonder if efforts by existing agencies to beef up their capabilities—such as the Interior Department's plan for a national biological survey—might make for redundancy.

Just how hardy this idea will prove may become clearer when the National Academy of Sciences finally delivers a report on federally sponsored environmental research. Now under review, the report, originally slated for release early this year, is expected out in a couple of months.

Britannica Out of the Doghouse

Scientists may lament their lack of political clout, but at least they've beaten the mighty *Encyclopædia Britannica* into shape. A year or so ago some went ballistic when they read the entry under "dogs" in the 1991 edition. The author, veterinarian Michael Fox of the Humane Society, had snuck in a little antivivisectionist rhetoric—questioning, for example, the use of dogs for medical research, and citing some nasty-sounding and out-of-date research.

Frank Standaert, then president of the American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics, responded by notifying all his members, and the encyclopedia got a bushel of angry mail. Now, it seems, all the offending wording has been removed in the 1993 edition—including Fox's mention of "a growing recognition of animals' rights."

Second Find Confirms Kuiper Comets

Is there a swarm of icy comets just beyond Neptune? The answer is now a definite yes. Astronomical theorists had invoked a disk of icy bodies in cold storage as the source of the 20% of known comets that loop around the sun in less than 200 years.

Last fall David Jewitt of the University of Hawaii and Jane Luu of the University of California, Berkeley, detected the first possible member of this so-called Kuiper Belt (*Science*, 25 September 1992, p. 1865). But the snail's pace of the body across the sky prevented pinning down its location.

But in observations made on 28 March, Jewitt and Luu discovered a second candidate, and they have refined the orbit of their first discovery, placing it firmly in the Kuiper Belt. Says Luu: "It really nails down the idea that there must be a swarm of comets beyond Neptune."