edited by RICHARD STONE

Varmus Wins Seat on Science Council

What does a Nobel Prize buy? For laureate Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health, the answer is a coveted seat on the president's new 20-member National Science and Technology Council (NSTC).

Created by executive order on 23 November, the NSTC is intended to be the Administration's primary vehicle for overseeing the $73 billion federal R&D budget. But unlike the director of the National Science Foundation, for example, who's on the council because he heads an independent agency, Varmus sits a few rungs down from the top of his parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services.

The initial exclusion of the head of the government's largest basic research agency upset the biomedical community, which saw it as another sign of President Clinton's indifference to health research. In response, Administration officials said giving two seats to one department would set a bad precedent. But Jack Gibbons, Clinton's science adviser, appealed to Vice President Al Gore, and last week the president made room for Varmus.

What changed Clinton's mind? Speaking partly tongue-in-cheek, Gibbons last week told the House Science Committee that Clinton issued a rule to limit the number of extra council members: Any agency seeking a second seat must fill it with a Nobelist. (Varmus won his prize in 1989 for work on viral oncogenes.)

One hitch is that NSTC has yet to meet. A senior science official says Clinton has been too busy but hopes to find a spare hour or two in the next 6 weeks.

Mice to Rescue Italian Role in EMBL?

The European Molecular Biology Laboratory's (EMBL) governing council faces a gloomy meeting at the lab's Heidelberg, Germany, headquarters next week—the first such gathering since Italy's surprise decision to withdraw from EMBL. But as *Science* went to press, one proposal that might avert an Italian pullout was winning support from several scientists on the EMBL council: launching a mouse genetics lab in Italy under the EMBL banner.

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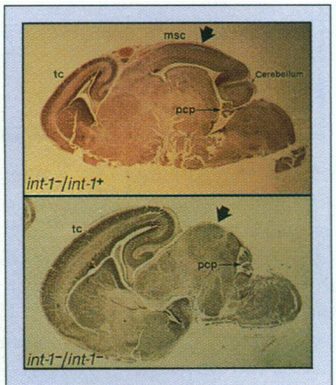

One gene short of a cerebellum. Italy may get a lab for knockout mice, such as the *wnt-1* strain that yields an underdeveloped brain *(bottom)*.

Italian officials have complained that their country's scientists are scarce at EMBL, even though Italy invests $6 million a year in the lab. But rather than shoehorn more Italians into Heidelberg, some council members say EMBL could set up a repository in Italy for mutant mice—particularly "knockout" strains, in which one or more genes are inactivated—and a mouse genetics research center. Apart from the idea's political virtues, it has scientific merit: Space constraints may soon force labs to discard valuable strains, says University of Cologne knockout pioneer Klaus Rajewsky.

Some EMBL member governments doubt that the plan is feasible. "We're not in a position to throw in large amounts of extra money," says British delegate Barton Dodd. But one solution, say some council scientists, might be a joint project with the European Union (EU), as the European Community is now known.

EMBL director-general Fotis Kafatos would not comment. However, the plan should appeal to EU's science advisers. An expert panel convened by Pasteur molecular biologist François Gros, life sciences adviser to EU research commissioner Antonio Ruberti, ranked a mouse repository high among its priorities.

Budget Blow for International Science

Unless Congress intercedes, next year the State Department will have to shut down one of the few programs aiding science in Eastern Europe.

According to a rite of budget, each year the president offers a few sacrificial lambs to prove his budget-cutting prowess. President Clinton adhered to custom earlier this week, when he proposed 115 federal programs for elimination in 1995. Most of his victims were sickly members of the herd—either congressional pork, or programs already slated for termination.

Somehow, however, three hale science programs got caught in the slaughter. Clinton's 1995 budget request for the State Department would save $4.3 million by disposing of seven science programs with Eastern Europe, three of which currently help fund more than $6 million worth of research. These joint ventures—programs in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic—appeal to foreign aid experts: Unlike most assistance programs, the recipients match the U.S. funds, and the money goes to actual science. On just a $600,000 grant this year, for example, the Czech Republic supported more than a dozen projects on everything from acid rain to hypertension.

Why does the Administration want to kill these programs? At least one official at State is stumped. "All the material I've got says how good they are," says spokesman Scott Thompson. "I don't know why we're killing them." However, an insider says the programs went unprotected during internal budget wars.

Clinton's decision has won him few friends in Eastern Europe. "We're very, very unhappy," says Jana Simonova, science and technology secretary for the Czech embassy. Congress could rescue the programs when it considers the budget request later this year.

Bio-Survey Chief

The nascent National Biological Survey (NBS)—an attempt to inventory every plant and animal species in the United States and study their habitats—appears to have its first director. Next week, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt is expected to tap University of Georgia ecologist Ronald Pulliam to head this new bureau, established within Interior last fall. Pulliam's shop should beat inflation next year: President Clinton has requested a $177 million budget for NBS in 1995, a 5.7% increase over this year.

AIDS Institute in Turmoil

A promising new player in AIDS research, San Francisco's Gladstone Institute of Virology and Immunology, is struggling to retain its research staff.

Last February, the 3-year-old institute announced it had recruited respected virologist Warner Greene as director and four top young scientists to pursue their own research projects. Backed by $28 million from a charitable trust, the researchers—Raoul Andino, Mark Feinberg, Alan Frankel, and John Young—were given new labs adjacent to San Francisco General Hospital and faculty posts at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF).

It appeared to be a dream job until last month, when the young guns announced plans to resign. Last week, however, UCSF officials and Gladstone trustees persuaded them to stay and seek professional help from a "facilitator."

Tensions remain high, and everyone is tight-lipped about the cause of the researchers' discontent. "We're dealing with a whole series of internal issues," says Greene. "It's nothing other than a difference of opinion about how to run an institute." One of the scientists insists the issues are far from trivial, but he, too, refused to elaborate. "Either we are absolutely crazy to think about leaving this place, or there are some serious problems here," he says, adding that research is progressing well. UCSF is now searching for a facilitator.