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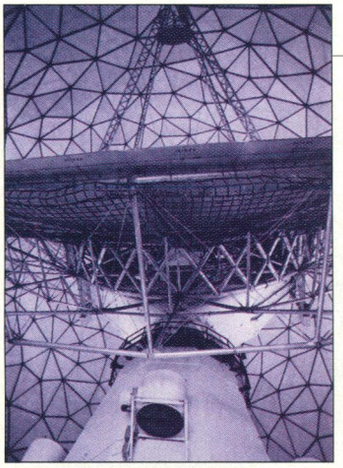

DONNA COVENEY/MIT

Star-crossed. Haystack, ranked last in NSF report, may lose funds.

Future Dims for Haystack Observatory

Dire consequences may await a Massachusetts-based radiotelescope that finished last in a National Science Foundation (NSF) review. Even though NSF has spent $750,000—half the cost of a just-completed upgrade—at MIT's Haystack Observatory, its strapped astronomy department is now expected to slash research funding at the facility's 37-meter telescope because of the ranking.

The review took place last summer, when Princeton astronomer Joseph Taylor led a panel that examined five academic radio observatories. Some astronomers saw the ominous signs early: After NSF's astronomy budget dropped 10% between 1992 and 1993, the agency asked Taylor's group to rank radio facilities based on past and expected future payoff. The report ranked Haystack's 30-year-old antenna last.

Yet, according to director Joseph Salah, Haystack's upgrade makes it the most sensitive single U.S. antenna at the 3-millimeter wavelength, crucial for studying galactic and extragalactic interstellar medium. So why is it in last place? Salah blames it in part on bad timing. When Taylor's panel visited last September, the Haystack upgrade was in progress and "we didn't have any demonstrated science," Salah says.

The observatory, in the final year of a 3-year grant, will receive a cut this year from its 1993 grant of $1.3 million, says an NSF official. But Salah says he's even more concerned about the next grant cycle. "If the funds for research disappear, I can't keep astronomers on staff," he says. Haystack has no plans to shut down completely, however: The Air Force funds monitoring of space debris, and NSF plans to continue using the antenna as part of a national array of radiotelescopes.

The Perils of Biotech Consulting

Scientists who consult for more than one biotech firm may be at risk of getting caught in the legal sniping over competing patent claims. That may be the lesson of a recent lawsuit between two California biotech companies over the development of a strain of transgenic mice.

In November 1989, Columbia geneticist Frederick Alt signed an agreement to consult for Cell Genesys, which sought Alt's advice for its work on transgenic animals that produce human antibodies to specific antigens. Such animals would be valuable because they may produce more potent and better targeted therapeutic products. Cell Genesys filed a U.S. patent for the invention in January 1990.

But Cell Genesys alleges that GenPharm "recruited Dr. Alt and convinced him to join with GenPharm to misappropriate Cell Genesys's proprietary, trade secret information" for which it was seeking a patent. In August 1990, GenPharm applied for U.S. patents for a similar transgenic system. Last month, Cell Genesys sued GenPharm in California Superior Court, seeking damages for misappropriation of trade secrets.

In a statement to *Science*, Alt, now at Boston Children's Hospital, said "there is no foundation in fact for the accusations.... GenPharm has never asked me to disclose information proprietary to Cell Genesys, and I have never volunteered such information." Alt, who was not named as a defendant in the suit, says he began consulting for GenPharm in October 1991—after it had filed patents. GenPharm has "denied categorically accusations of wrongdoing"; the firm is expected to file a brief next month.

CDC Finds New Strain of Hantavirus

The deadly family of rodent-borne hantaviruses now has a new member: Scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have nabbed a novel strain lurking in Florida.

Last spring, a spate of lung-failure deaths in the Southwestern United States triggered an intense hunt for the killer, which proved to be a previously unknown hantavirus now called Muerto Canyon virus (MCV) (*Science*, 5 November 1993, p. 832). Transmitted through the air from rodents to people, MCV can lead to the often-fatal hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS). Of 59 HPS cases confirmed so far, 35 people have died.

CDC isolated the new strain from a Florida man with HPS-like symptoms last October and reported its findings last week in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. The man, who recovered, failed to show an immune response characteristic of acute HPS, and he has not been classified as an HPS case, says CDC epidemiologist Rima Kahabbaz. This, she says, suggests the new strain might be less deadly than the Southwestern types.

The new strain, which resembles both MCV and a third hantavirus found in Louisiana, extends the range of MCV-like hantaviruses. The main MCV carrier, the deer mouse, lives in most of North America except the Southeastern United States; the range of the likely carrier of the Florida strain, the cotton rat (*Sigmodon hispidus*), includes the Southeast and runs up to Colorado and down to northern South America, says CDC epidemiologist James Childs.

CDC officials say MCV remains the agency's major hantavirus concern. As soon as the snow melts in the mountains of the Southwest late in the spring, says Childs, the CDC will begin "major rodent surveys" to track hantavirus infection in thousands of animals in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah.

Controversial SIDS Advice May Get Government Imprimatur

For the past 2 years, a group of doctors has been trying to change the way infants are put to bed in the United States, arguing that it's a matter of life and death. Citing evidence from abroad, the pediatricians say babies who are put to sleep on their side or back (supine) rather than on their stomach (prone) are less likely to die of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). So far, the activists have met with inertia. But help may be on the way: The Public Health Service is poised to support a campaign to reverse a decades-old American tradition.

According to a U.S. survey in 1992, most parents and nearly half the physicians interviewed believed the prone position is best for infants. However, studies in Australia, Britain, New Zealand, and Norway have noted a marked decline in SIDS deaths after doctors began to promote supine sleep.

Now, public and private agencies are gearing up for a media blitz to change the prevailing wisdom in the United States, says John Kattwinkel, a pediatric researcher at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. The American Academy of Pediatrics plans to issue a new endorsement of supine sleeping, and sources say the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Surgeon General may follow suit.

However, some pediatricians remain skeptical for two reasons: The rate of SIDS deaths is already much lower in the United States than in other industrialized countries that have adopted a change in infant sleep position, and the main theory of how prone sleeping increases SIDS risk—that children are more likely to rebreathe noxious carbon dioxide—remains unproven.