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**New astronomy bastion.** Asteroid trackers hope to tap into a system based inside Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado.

## Asteroids Now on Air Force's Radar Screen

Astronomers who track asteroids and comets, like everyone else in their field, can never get enough telescope time. Now the U.S. Air Force Space Command wants to lend them an eye.

As part of its mission to defend the country against air attack, the military unit operates

five telescopes around the world that can spot basketball-sized objects orbiting more than 20,000 miles above Earth. Data from these Ground-based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance sites are beamed to a control center deep within Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado Springs.

With an eye to defense conversion, the Air Force plans to modify one or more of these telescopes to spot an asteroid 1 kilometer in diameter at a distance of 100 million kilometers. With more than 1000 asteroids of that size estimated to cross Earth's orbit, there should be plenty of work. The likely cost—tens of thousands of dollars—could easily be covered by

the Defense Department's general fund for basic research, says an Air Force official. And the support would be welcome. "It would be great if we could use the telescopes for an asteroid survey without affecting the military's mission," says David Morrison, head of the space science division at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) Ames Research Center in California.

The timing isn't bad, either, what with the hoopla surrounding comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 (see p. 601). Last week the House Science, Space and Technology Committee ordered the government to identify and catalog the orbital paths of all large comets and asteroids that cross Earth's path. The committee asked NASA to report back by 1 February with a 10-year plan for such a survey.

## Senate Tackles Alternative NIH Budget

When the Senate debates the National Institutes of Health's (NIH's) 1995 budget over the next few days, it will be considering a bill that's more generous than one passed by the House last month. At the same time, the Senate bill includes some quirky provisions, such as a boost for alternative medicine.

The Senate appropriations committee has proposed giving NIH \$11.3 billion next year—\$138.7 million less than the president asked for, but \$11.6 million more than the House gave it. Each of eight NIH institutes and centers would get roughly \$1 million to \$2 million more than the House offered; the National Library of Medicine, \$4 million more; and the NIH director's office, \$4 million less. The Senate bill doesn't provide the \$8.5 million included in the House legislation for a director's discretionary fund. But it does mandate a \$1-million National Academy of Sciences study on the importance of medical research.

And there are other areas in the NIH director's office on which the Senate bill is quite keen. For example, it proposes increasing the budget of the Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM) from around \$3.5 million to \$6 million. Nontraditional medicine has long fascinated the Iowa delegation, and it has caught the eye of Senator

Tom Harkin (D-IA), chair of the appropriations subcommittee that drafted the bill. In addition to raising OAM's budget, the committee urges NIH to create an electronic database on alternative therapies, send field agents to scout out promising new treatments, and investigate as a cancer treatment "the active molecules from shark cartilage."

## New Bioethics Board

*Science* has learned that the Office of Science and Technology Policy is preparing to announce the establishment of a new National Bioethics Advisory Commission. According to sources at the White House and the office of Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR), who has long advocated the creation of such a panel, the new group will be composed of 13 to 15 presidential appointees and will rule on medical and bioethical issues of national significance that may arise in federal agencies. Administration officials declined to discuss the details of the panel's authority or jurisdiction, which were still being negotiated at press time.

## NIH Sets Opening for Behavioral Office

After trying for more than a year to get their foot in the door, social and behavioral scientists are on the verge of waltzing into the inner sanctum of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Their entree is a new office of behavioral and social science research, set to open in late November in the office of NIH Director Harold Varmus.

The office is a triumph for behavioral scientists, some of whom have accused NIH of ignoring their needs despite an \$800-million research portfolio (*Science*, 15 April, p. 342). The office was created as part of a reauthorization of NIH programs that became law in June 1993; Susan Persons of the Consortium of Social Science Associations believes that the delay in establishing the office suggests it "wasn't the priority Dr. Varmus has said it is." But Varmus insists that's not true. "We need to encourage the best possible research in this area," he told *Science*, adding that he's "very eager" to see the office open.

NIH is looking for a director for the office. The search committee is led by Wendy Baldwin, NIH's deputy director for extramural research, and Delores Peron, associate director for special populations at the National Institute of Mental Health.

## Registration Lags for Japan's AIDS Meeting

Next month's international AIDS conference looks to be a cozy gathering compared with the buzzing circuses of recent years. So far only about 5600 people have registered for the 10th annual conference in Yokohama from 7 to 12 August. In comparison, last year's meeting in Berlin drew more than 14,000 participants.

The downturn is especially evident among the U.S. delegation. U.S. registrants, who previously have comprised about a third of the crowd, numbered less than 1000 as *Science* went to press. U.S. researchers cite the expense of traveling to Japan and the dollar's weakness against the yen as key reasons for staying home this year.

