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Shuttle protector? Great horned owl.

Shuttle Troubles: Bring Back the Owls

In desperation, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) tried many technical tricks last week to shield the space shuttle Discovery from the depredations of a pair of yellow-shafted flickers, which were punching holes in the space vehicle's insulation. But NASA's defenses were of little use, so the space agency hauled the shuttle—originally scheduled to take off on 8 June—under protective cover and set a new launch date of 13 July. Meanwhile, NASA scientists are contemplating the possibility that the agency may be battling a wildlife problem of its own making: The recent attacks by the flickers may be a problem created by the shuttle itself.

Four great horned owls—a natural predator of the flicker—were killed when the shuttle Endeavor took off in March. And according to Kathy Whaley, assistant manager of the Cape Canaveral wildlife refuge, it's possible that those owls were the only thing keeping the local woodpeckers under control. Since then, NASA technicians have tried to scare the flickers away with owl decoys and taped owl screeches, to no avail. Whaley predicts that when the shuttle rolls out again next month, "chances are ... the woodpeckers will show up again," too.

Cancer Trial of Interleukin-12 Halted

A genetic engineering product that shows promise as a treatment for cancer, AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria suffered a setback last week after one kidney cancer patient in a clinical trial of the drug died, and 11 others had what the drug's manufacturer calls "adverse reactions."

Genetics Institute Inc. (GI) of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the biotechnology company that makes the test material—interleukin-12 (IL-12)—put a multicenter study on hold 8 June when two of the 17 patients were hospitalized after the trial's second week. The next day, one patient died; over the next few days 10 more patients were hospitalized.

"It's too early to say whether there was a common class of symptoms in these patients," says company spokesperson Dennis Harp, adding that it is still unclear whether IL-12 toxicities caused the one death. Harp also notes that in earlier trials, 80 patients who either had cancer or HIV infection received the treatment without similar side effects, even though they received comparable doses of IL-12.

IL-12 is a naturally occurring cytokine, a family of chemical messengers that the immune system uses to coordinate a counterattack against everything from wayward bacteria to tumor cells. Excitement has built around the possibilities of using IL-12 as a drug, and GI's kidney cancer study was the most advanced test in humans to date (*Science*, 9 June, p. 1432).

"This is discouraging, but it doesn't necessarily rule out the use of IL-12 in other settings," says immunologist Alan Sher, who studies IL-12 in mice at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Sher stresses that he has yet to see any data about the kidney cancer trial and favors a wait-and-see attitude. "It would be a shame to scale back research," says Sher.

NSF Considers a Long Shot

Caught in an endless cycle of funding proposals? Relief may be on the way for a few National Science Foundation (NSF) grantees. Some NSF officials are weighing the idea of 10-year grants—more than three times the usual length—for a handful of elite researchers to free them from the grantsmanship grind and let them stretch their intellectual horizons.

NSF's Bill Harris, who brought the idea to the advisory committee of the directorate for Mathematical and Physical Sciences, which he heads, sees the award as a badge of honor. "The idea is to give recognition to outstanding researchers and educators," he says, "and send a message to the community that such efforts will be rewarded." Princeton's Peter Eisenberger, co-chair of the advisory panel, says longer grants are one of several options for easing the administrative burden on applicants and NSF in the escalating competition for funds. "The current situation is not healthy, and we need new procedures to deal with declining resources," he says. The typical NSF grant for individuals runs for 3 years, although groups and centers can receive a longer commitment.

Before NSF leaps, however, it may want to look at a similar program that the National Cancer Institute (NCI) began in 1985—and ended in 1992. At its peak, the NCI program was funneling $62 million a year to 84 "outstanding investigators" who had received 7-year grants. But the size of each grant rose faster than NCI's budget, explains Marvin Kalt, head of NCI's division of extramural activities, and a plummeting success rate for all other applicants forced NCI to question the value of the program. "Some people's work had descended from the absolute best to the very good," says Kalt, "and that's a big difference when your payline is below 15% [of fundable proposals]."

Court Opens Peer Review Files

A recent court ruling may give peer reviewers some unwelcome public exposure after a federal district court took the side of an unsuccessful applicant for funding from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST).

The case began when Wanda Henke, co-owner of a seismic technology firm in Lutherville, Maryland, applied several times for a grant from NIST's Advanced Technology Program and was turned down. Henke asked for the reviewers' names and verbatim text of their comments, explaining that she needed such details to rule out conflict of interest; NIST offered summary comments. Henke sued.

On 26 May, Judge Thomas Flannery of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ruled that Henke may have access to NIST's files. The Privacy Act, Flannery wrote, requires that any agency that keeps a "system of records" in which a person's name can be used to retrieve records about that person must allow the subject to check the records for accuracy.

NIST spokesperson Michael Newman says agency lawyers are "analyzing and evaluating" Flannery's ruling, but aren't ready to comment. NIST has until the end of July to respond. Henke's attorney, Eric Glitzenstein of Washington, D.C., says that he expects the tussle over peer review to end up in higher court either through an appeal by NIST or an appeal by Henke of an unfavorable ruling last year based on a similar request to the National Science Foundation (NSF) (*Science*, 11 February 1994, p. 747). In that case, the court upheld NSF's guidelines that protect confidentiality.