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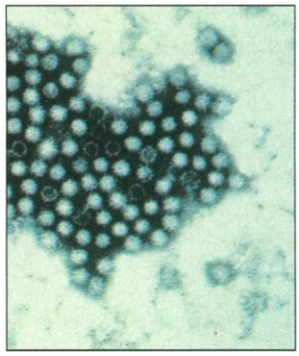

CSIRO/AAHL

Still leashed. Australia will do more tests before releasing a rabbit-killing calicivirus.

Australia Postpones Rabbit Virus Release

A planned biological assault on Australia's 300 million non-native wild rabbits has been delayed for at least 4 months while new tests are conducted on native animals and on scientists who have worked with the Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease virus. Government officials say the research should offer further evidence of the safety of the virus, which escaped quarantine last fall in the midst of a 2-year experiment to study its effectiveness as a control agent. But animal activists see the tests as vindication of the claims of U.S. virologist Alvin Smith and others (*Science*, 12 April, p. 191) that not enough is known about the capacity of the potent calicivirus to spread to other species.

"We think that the federal minister is beginning to listen," says Don Fuller of the Defense Coalition Against Rabbit Calicivirus Disease. "Our Australian scientists, with only recent experience with caliciviruses ... have a duty to at least recognize the grave warnings of [expert] American scientists."

The new tests involve three of Australia's most beloved species: the koala, the wombat, and the echidna. Field scientists will also be tested for the virus, even though epidemiological studies in Europe—where the disease originated—have shown no incidence of human infection.

Some scientists believe the public fears the virus irrationally. "It's about community perceptions, especially in urban areas, as much as anything else," says Nicholas Newland of the Australian Animal Health Laboratory (AAHL), which will carry out the new tests. If all goes well, AAHL hopes to win government approval for a large-scale release in August.

Russia Aims to Soothe Space Jitters

Russia will keep its promise to build a key component of the international space station, according to U.S. and Russian officials. Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin assured Vice President Al Gore in an 8 April letter that Russia will come up with the money to build the service module that will house the station crew in the early phase of the program.

The White House hopes this will quiet critics in Congress who are skeptical of Russia's ability to participate in the expensive project. Chernomyrdin was responding to a sharply worded 10 March complaint from Gore on the Russian government's tardiness in funding the module (*Science*, 22 March, p. 1657).

That delay has fueled a growing concern among station supporters that Russian foot-dragging could spell political doom for the program. Representative James Sensenbrenner (R–WI), who chairs the House Science Committee panel that oversees space issues, last week harshly criticized both the White House and the Russian government for their handling of the matter.

But Alexander Kuznetsov, deputy director general of the Russian Space Agency, told *Science* that the United States shouldn't worry: "Work on the module is continuing," he said. Nevertheless, Chernomyrdin agreed to set up a periodic reporting system to keep the White House informed of Russia's progress on the station.

AIDS Vaccine Trial Disappointing

Results are in from the largest test yet of a controversial vaccine that manufacturer MicroGeneSys Inc. hoped might stave off disease in people infected with HIV, and the news isn't good: "It didn't show any efficacy at all," says Colonel Donald Burke, head of the AIDS program for the U.S. military, which led the trial.

The 5-year test of the vaccine, which contains a genetically engineered version of an HIV surface protein called gp160, involved 608 HIV-infected people at 17 sites. The participants, half of whom received a placebo shot instead of the vaccine, all had relatively intact immune systems when the trial began. Military researchers were expected to announce this week that although people who received the vaccine developed a wider range of immune responses to HIV, the destruction of their immune systems and their disease progression occurred at the same rate as in those who received the placebo. Last week, researchers at Canada's Montreal General Hospital released results from a similar 3-year trial completed last fall involving 278 people who also gained "no clinical benefit."

Connecticut-based MicroGeneSys outraged many AIDS researchers 4 years ago when its lobbyists convinced Congress to bypass peer review and budget $20 million for a major efficacy trial of the gp160 vaccine (*Science*, 23 October 1992, p. 536). The controversy ensnared top officials at the National Institutes of Health, the Defense Department, and even the White House. The money ultimately went to peer-reviewed basic research.

Results from the Canadian study—and probably the U.S. one, too—will be presented this July at the international AIDS conference in Vancouver.

German Reactor Construction Begins

Physicists at Munich's Technical University (TU) are celebrating Bavaria's decision last week to license initial construction for a controversial new neutron source. But opponents are hoping the TU will fall short on the next step—obtaining a license of the reactor itself, which will burn weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU) fuel.

U.S. officials had tried unsuccessfully to convince the TU to redesign the $540 million FRM-II research reactor to operate on low-enriched uranium fuel (LEU), which poses less danger of illicit use (*Science*, 26 January, p. 437). But to the dismay of Germany's Green and Social Democrat parties, Bavaria's environment ministry granted the initial construction license on 9 April. The Nuclear Control Institute in Washington, D.C., criticized the decision. But Bavarian officials argued that the reactor is safely designed and will boost high-tech industries doing advanced materials research.

TU officials have secured commitments for a 10-year supply of HEU through an arm of the European Union's nuclear agency, Euratom. First, though, the university must complete safety testing of the unusually dense HEU fuel. FRM-II project leader Anton Axmann expects that will happen "in the coming year" and predicts that within a year Bavaria will license the reactor itself. The completed facility, to be built in Garching by Siemans AG, could start up by 2001 if it receives a final operating license.

Samuel Werner, president of the Neutron Scattering Society of America, told *Science* his 600-member group believes the FRM-II will increase Europe's lead over the United States in neutron sources. A society working group is considering whether to recommend that U.S. officials allow greater leeway in using HEU fuel in U.S. research reactors, most of which have been converted to LEU fuel.