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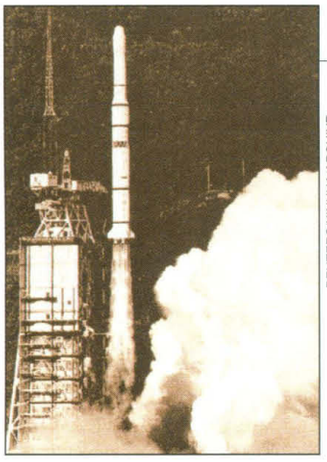

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On track? China hopes Long March's record will improve.

Russia to Aid China's Human Space Effort

China may soon be the third country with a human space program. Industry experts believe the Chinese—thanks to new plans to collaborate with cash-strapped Russian space scientists—will be able to send their first cosmonauts into space by the turn of the century.

According to recent reports in the Russian news media, the Chinese are seeking help from the Russian Space Agency (RKA) to kick-start a national human space-flight program. Last October, eight to 10 Chinese cosmonauts arrived at Star City, Russia's space-training center outside Moscow, says Phillip Clark, editor of *Jane's Space Directory*, an annual report on the industry. "Officially, nothing was announced," he says. However, he adds, it appears that two cosmonauts are training for an 8-day Soyuz mission to the space station Mir in 1998, while the rest are getting training geared toward China's own program.

The Russia connection is China's latest attempt to revive its struggling 15-year-old human space program, says John Pike, space-policy director at the Federation of American Scientists. China's heavy-duty "Long March" rockets have blown up several times, and the Chinese have been tight-lipped "in accounting for what went wrong," Pike says. But industry experts predict that Chinese technical advances—coupled with Russian expertise—will help to rapidly clear up the Long March's service record, enabling the first human space flights around the year 2000.

Cash seems to be the main force driving Russian participation. "When the Chinese fly to Mir, they will pay for the privilege," says Clark. RKA Director-General Yuri Koptev told the Russian news service Novosti that the two countries plan to ink contracts early next year for a joint Mir mission.

Good Times for European Biology Lab

One of Europe's top molecular biology centers is beginning the new year with a bang—a bigger budget that will help keep on track its expanded activities. The European Molecular Biology Lab's (EMBL's) council and finance committee last month fully backed the lab's promised 2.7% increase (to $47 million) for 1997, allaying fears that some of the 15 member countries weren't ready to maintain their support.

The lab now has the green light for the second year of a 5-year plan to build a new program in developmental biology at its headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany, a mouse genetics program at its new labs near Rome, and expanded activities—such as more bioinformatics databases—at its other centers in the United Kingdom and France. "The decision marks strong support for the lab from member countries," says Director-General Fotis Kafatos. And, in an endorsement of Kafatos's efforts, the council extended his term until 2005.

EMBL staffers were anxiously awaiting the results of this council meeting, although Germany, which has cut its payments to many international labs, said in November that it would support an increase. In addition to boosting the budget, the council brought cheer by approving postponed staff raises at two centers. The council also agreed to review EMBL's employment conditions, indicating that it might be willing to reconsider pay levels.

EMBL biologist Kai Simons is pleased with the outcome. "It's a tough time, and the lab's management deserves credit for doing its homework and convincing people about the importance of molecular biology," he says.

Neurologists See Risk In Unlabeled Reagent

Researchers in two neurology labs were surprised to learn last month that a reagent they were using—known as N-2—may have been derived from the blood of someone who died of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), a fatal nerve disorder that can be transmitted by direct contact with infected tissue. While many agree that the risk of transmission through lab materials is vanishingly small, the scientists remain concerned and say the reagent should have carried a warning label.

Neurologists at the Harvard-affiliated Children's Hospital in Boston, who asked not to be named, say they heard "through the grapevine" that the batch of N-2 they were using was possibly contaminated with the CJD agent. The researchers were particularly upset when they checked the N-2 labels and saw no mention of its human derivation. Since then, some scientists have contacted the manufacturer—Life Technologies of Grand Island, New York—and received replacement batches of N-2.

But Life Technologies has not put out a warning note. In a faxed response to *Science*'s questions, official Keith Gittermann explained that the company was told by its supplier, the Bayer Corp., that the American Red Cross has withdrawn several lots of a blood product used to make N-2 because a blood donor was later diagnosed with CJD. But "outside experts," Gittermann says, have determined that the risk to lab workers is negligible; therefore, the company "has not recalled any lots of product."

This decision appears in line with an advisory put out by the Food and Drug Administration on 11 December. It says materials derived from possible CJD patients need not be quarantined or destroyed if they are "intended for further manufacturing into non-injectable products." However, FDA does say that such products should be labeled "biohazard."

Major Biomedical Charity Gets Started in Michigan

The co-founder of home product giant Amway Inc. and his wife have created a new charity to fund biomedical research that could one day come close to the $9 billion Howard Hughes Medical Institute in size. Its first project is a center to study how nutrients influence gene expression, a prototype for a network of centers and labs funded by the institute.

The largess comes from Jay Van Andel, whose net worth is estimated by *Forbes* magazine at $3.2 billion, and his wife Betty. Last month, the Van Andel Institute for Education and Medical Research announced its five-member board of scientific advisers, including four Nobel laureates involved with genetics or metabolism research.

The new center will be in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The topic of how nutrients influence gene expression is of particular interest to Van Andel, who got his start selling vitamins. It will house about 11 research teams and have a budget of at least $8 million per year, says the institute's president, Luis Tomatis. A director is expected to be named soon.

But that's only the beginning. Upon the death of the Van Andels, who are in their 70s, "the bulk of their taxable estate" will go to the institute, Tomatis says. Eventually, he says, it expects to become a "hybrid" of freestanding centers and the Hughes model, which supports researchers at universities. The scientific advisers have been asked to identify future research topics, which could range from cancer to neurodegenerative diseases.