SCIENCESCOPE

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Hot stuff. Thermophiles (*purple*) in a Yellowstone hot spring.

An Extreme Bid for Funding

Is $100 million a year too much to spend exploring far-out life on Earth? Middle managers at the National Science Foundation (NSF) don't think so, and they hope that one day the newly announced Life in Extreme Environments (LExEn) initiative may reach such a level (*Science*, 31 January, p. 623). But they'll have to convince senior officials, who so far aren't willing to spring for more than $6 million.

LExEn is aimed at learning more about organisms that live on the edge in terms of temperature, salinity, pressure, and pH levels. Last week, program managers held a meeting to explain the initiative. And the response—more than 50 of their colleagues turned out—suggests there's strong scientific interest.

Last fall, managers asked the White House for $20 million, but senior NSF officials later withdrew the plan in favor of a new computer initiative called Knowledge and Distributed Intelligence.

Some NSF managers think the science is good enough to justify spending $100 million a year for a decade, and NSF has begun talks with five other federal agencies on possible joint projects that could swell the pot. The first test of its merit, however, will be the proposals submitted to NSF by the 14 April deadline.

Editorial Ethics Questioned

Rivalry between two of the world's top medical journals broke into print this week when *The Lancet* of London ran a letter in its 15 February issue criticizing *The New England Journal of Medicine* (*NEJM*) of Boston, Massachusetts, for lax editorial policies. The letter, signed by cardiologist Peter Wilmshurst of the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital in Shrewsbury, U.K., claims that *NEJM* has refused to investigate financial conflicts of interest among its authors and that *NEJM*'s editorial selection process is biased in favor of local authors.

Wilmshurst's letter came in response to an editorial in the 7 September issue of *The Lancet* that discussed an alleged conflict of interest of *NEJM* authors. But he contends that problems at the journal go much deeper.

For example, Wilmshurst cites a 1988 case in which he alleges that an article by a British author was rejected in favor of a later submission on the same topic by a group of Harvard University researchers, one of whom had previously reviewed the British article. Wilmshurst also claims that four out of five authors of a 1978 *NEJM* article on the heart drug amrinone had received support from the drug's manufacturer without revealing this fact. He suggested that *NEJM* should appoint an ombudsman, as *The Lancet* has done, to "get to the truth of these cases."

Wilmshurst's attack on *NEJM* appears as an independent comment in *The Lancet*'s letters section. But *The Lancet* gave it prominence by including it in a list of items highlighted for the media released on 13 February. *The Lancet* seems ready to keep the criticism coming, too: Deputy Editor David Sharp confirms that the journal will soon be publishing a longer article by Wilmshurst on the "general topic" of conflicts in medical publishing.

NEJM's current editor, Jerome Kassirer, declined to comment. But Arnold Relman, editor when the articles in question appeared, rejected Wilmshurst's allegations. Referring to Wilmshurst, Relman said: "Sometimes rejected would-be authors take a rather unkind view of the editors who have made negative decisions on their manuscripts. I categorically deny Dr. Wilmshurst's implication of editorial improprieties. Most of the events he talks about are old and buried and not usefully rehashed now. But Wilmshurst is simply wrong in most of his accusations."

Gene Fragments Patentable, Official Says

A patent official caused a stir at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (which publishes *Science*) when he said on 14 February that the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) will grant patents on short stretches of DNA known as expressed sequence tags (ESTs). PTO's Lawrence Goffney said that the office "has decided to allow claims to ESTs based on their utility as probes" to identify specific DNA sequences.

This is good news for companies pursuing patents on human gene fragments. But some researchers, including Leroy Hood of the University of Washington, worry that the PTO may be awarding patents too freely for minor discoveries. Says Hood: "I am not surprised ... but I am dismayed."

Goffney explained that the PTO recognizes the patentability of inventions even if they can be used only as tools. According to the PTO's biotech chief, John Doll, the agency has already issued some patents on ESTs with a well-defined use. But he adds that "giant applications" containing tens of thousands of ESTs are still being reviewed. They are subject to a set of new procedures announced last fall (*Science*, 25 October, p. 487). Doll could not predict when the first of these cases might clear the Patent Office.

The 7% R&D Solution

On 4 March, a coalition of scientific societies with a membership of close to 1 million will hold a press conference to ask Congress for a 7% increase in the 1998 research budgets of the five agencies that provide the bulk of federal funding for basic science. That's more than twice the increase allotted in the president's budget.

The plea for greater support for NIH, NSF, NASA, and the research components of the departments of defense and energy comes amid encouraging words from Congress and the White House about the value of science. In fact, several major biological groups have not signed onto the coalition's request because they don't want to undercut their campaign for a 9% increase at NIH.

High-Powered Support for AIDS Vaccine

The new AIDS vaccine committee at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) met for the first time last week, covering everything from the 1998 budget to the possibility of creating a centralized AIDS vaccine institute.

The 11-member committee, headed by Nobel laureate David Baltimore of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), met all day on 17 February, with drop-ins from NIH director Harold Varmus and NIH majordomos Anthony Fauci, Ruth Kirschstein, Rick Klausner, and Bill Paul. That star-studded turnout "reflects the great interest in seeing the vaccines move to a very prominent position in the AIDS program," says Baltimore.

The members of the committee are: Barry Bloom of Yeshiva University, Robert Couch of Baylor College of Medicine, Beatrice Hahn of the University of Alabama, Birmingham, MIT's Peter Kim, Harvard's Norman Letvin, Dan Littman of New York University, University of Pennsylvania's Neal Nathanson, Douglas Richman of the University of California, San Diego, Bill Snow of the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition, and Stanford's Irving Weissman.