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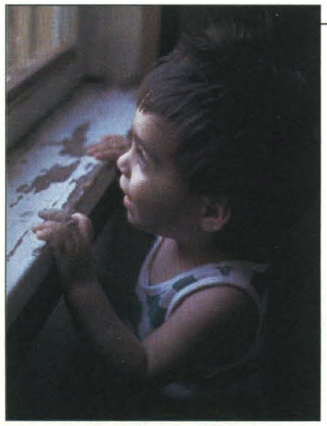

TONY FREEMAN/PNI

Mystery. Can scientists figure out who made this paint's pigment?

Hunt Proposed to Find Lead Sources

Note to all Sherlock Holmes types in the scientific community: A private source is putting up $2.5 million for chemical sleuths to try to figure out how to link pigment in a chip of lead paint to its manufacturer. If anyone succeeds, the results could send a shock wave through the business world by allowing thousands of lead-poisoned people to be compensated for their injuries.

The offer comes from a trust created in 1996 when Eagle-Picher Industries Inc. of Cincinnati which went bankrupt after being hit with a wave of personal-injury lawsuits claiming harm from asbestos and lead-based pigments made by the company. The $680 million trust set aside $2.5 million for research on lead-related diseases. According to a preliminary request for proposals, the "most likely and immediate task" would be to try to figure out whether pigment in a lead paint sample—from a house, for example—can be linked to its manufacturer and production date. The results could help figure out exactly who should receive compensation, says trustee James McMonagle.

This isn't the first time such a settlement has paid for research; for example, after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, funds were set aside for exposure studies. But this particular fund could have unusually far-reaching implications. Hundreds of lead-poisoning lawsuits are filed against landlords every year. But no compensation has ever been paid in claims against the half-dozen companies that made lead pigments because it hasn't been possible to finger specific manufacturers.

There's already some evidence that isotopic ratios of lead can be used to trace a lead sample to the mine it came from, notes University of Pittsburgh lead poisoning expert Herbert Needleman. Because companies got lead from the same mines, pinpointing the manufacturer "is a very difficult problem, but that doesn't mean it's unsolvable," Needleman says. McMonagle says the trust first plans to study preproposals—due by 1 April—"to see if it's even feasible."

Campus Licensing Deals Taking Off

Relations between academia and industry—which went into a deep chill during the 1960s and 1970s—have grown warm and cozy in the 1990s. The best evidence of the warming trend may come from deals made between universities and outside companies hoping to exploit ideas developed on campus. Last week, the Association of University Technology Managers Inc. (AUTM) released a survey of 1996 transactions by its 173 members. This sixth annual AUTM report shows a huge increase in business, with the total number of issued licenses growing at roughly 12% per year since 1991.

TOP 10 ACADEMIC PATENTERS
Ranked by gross license income ($ millions), 1996

Institution	License income	New patents filed	Legal expenses
U. of California System	63.200	325	17.968
Stanford	43.752	130	2.306
Columbia	40.632	94	2.908
Michigan State	17.232	77	0.736
U. of Wisc. Madison–WARF	13.092	75	1.801
U. of Chicago–ARCH	12.540	31	1.020
U. of Florida	11.045	61	1.765
MIT	10.083	158	4.218
Washington U.	9.413	44	0.979
U. of Washington–WRF	8.651	85	0.762

SOURCE: AUTM

Top Science Official Bids NASA Goodbye

Huntress

NASA's space science chief Wes Huntress earned an emotional standing ovation from an advisory panel last week when he unexpectedly announced his resignation after more than 5 years on the job. Huntress is credited with reinvigorating a program that was beset by budget shortfalls, spacecraft failures, and squabbling among disciplines. Now the budget is on the rise, a series of ambitious Mars missions is in the works, and a host of small, cheap data-gathering spacecraft are planned for the next decade.

"His vision is a major part of what turned the program around," says Anneila Sargent, a California Institute of Technology astronomer who chairs the NASA space science advisory committee. "He kept his cool and kept the community together," says another panel member, Norine Noonan of the Florida Institute of Technology. Huntress told the panel during an 18 February meeting at Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California, that he "hasn't a clue where [he's] going," explaining that "it's simply time to move on."

Huntress told *Science* he plans to leave the agency in the fall. NASA Administrator Dan Goldin already has a few candidates in mind for his successor—including Sargent, according to agency officials. Sargent would say only that "the job is infinitely more desirable than it was when Wes took it."

NCI Hand-Off Triggers Smoke Alarm

Antitobacco researchers are making a stink over a plan by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to pass off its antismoking program to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It's "ridiculous," says University of California, San Francisco, heart researcher Stanton Glantz, who fears that the successful program, called ASSIST, will stagnate and its research component die.

The $25 million ASSIST program is unusual for NCI: Its grants go not to cell biology labs or clinics, but to community programs that work to establish smoke-free buildings, raise cigarette taxes, and reduce underage smoking. Set up as a pilot project, the program also does policy research. ASSIST has taken a 7% bite out of tobacco sales in roughly a dozen states since 1993, according to a 1997 study by NCI, CDC, and other agencies. And that, argues Glantz, makes it "probably the most effective thing the NCI has ever done to prevent cancer." But now, Glantz charges, "[NCI director] Rick Klausner doesn't want to be bothered with anything that's not basic research."

Klausner, however, says now that ASSIST has proved itself as a prevention program, it fits better at CDC, where it's set to move this fall. That could be good news, as President Clinton's 1999 budget proposal would boost CDC's budget for ASSIST by $17 million to expand coverage beyond its current 17 states, says NCI staffer Marc Manley.

But Congress must still approve the increase. And Glantz is also worried because it seems CDC won't pick up ASSIST's research component. CDC itself does some tobacco-control studies, says the centers' Dearell Niemeyer, but "the NCI is the premier research arm." According to Manley, "NCI is not backing off [from] its commitment" to tobacco-control research, but he acknowledges that no plan to continue the ASSIST studies is in place yet.