New Chief for Rockefeller

Levine

ROBERT REICHERT/THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

Drawing rave reviews from the scientific community, Rockefeller University announced last week that Arnold J. Levine, a cancer biologist at Princeton University, will be its next president. He will take over from neurobiologist Torsten Wiesel, who is retiring in November.

Levine, 58, is the "ideal person" to lead Rockefeller, said board chair Richard M. Furlaud. Levine discovered the p53 tumor suppressor protein in 1979. Because p53 is implicated in 50% of all cancers, the finding paved the way for a new generation of cancer research. He is also known for heading a massive review of the National Institutes of Health AIDS program in 1996.

Colleagues give him the thumbs-up. "Fantastic," says Harvard University chemist Gregory Verdine of the appointment. He calls Levine "a very high-energy person [with] a tremendous amount of breadth" scientifically, and he predicts that as "a really entrepreneurial guy," Levine will put strong emphasis on the importance of translating research findings at Rockefeller into practical applications. What's more, says Verdine, "the ties will be loosened a little bit around there. ... [Levine will] really stir things up."

All Quiet on the Bioethics Front

After a turn in the limelight last year with its cloning report, the President's National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) has fallen silent, and some critics are getting increasingly frustrated. "They've been having the same discussion [on how to protect the rights of tissue donors] for a year," grumbles one bureaucrat who has attended NBAC meetings.

The 2-year-old NBAC produced a report on the risks of human cloning last year but hasn't published a thing since. One of its financial contributors, the Veterans Affairs Administration (VA), is getting fed up: It is "distressing ... that 19 months and 21 meetings after its inception, NBAC has produced only one report," wrote Robyn Nishimi, chief of staff for the VA undersecretary for health, in a 27 May letter to the White House. Nishimi said the VA will reluctantly pony up its 1999 contribution of $150,000 to NBAC's $2.6 million budget, but it wants the Office of Science and Technology Policy to do a "thorough review ... on the need for continuation of NBAC's efforts."

NBAC says its donors will soon be rewarded. Eric Meslin, executive director since February, admits it took time to "get back on track" after the cloning report. But he says NBAC will deliver "one and possibly two new reports"—on human tissues research and on obtaining consent from mentally impaired human subjects—this year. What's more, says Meslin, NBAC aims to complete by mid-1999 a broad review of federal management of bioethics issues. He concludes: "We have a very robust agenda."

Putrid Plant Puts On Rare Show

CRAIG M. ALLEN/FAIRCHILD TROPICAL GARDEN

The odor of rotting flesh was in the air late last month at Miami's Fairchild Tropical Garden—and the crowds there loved it. That was when their aptly named *Amorphophallus titanum*—the "largest unbranched inflorescence in the world"—bloomed, only the sixth documented bloom of the huge tuber in the United States this century, according to garden officials. *A. titanum*, found only in the rainforests of western Sumatra, exudes its overpowering stench—said to resemble decaying flesh—when it's ready to be serviced by the great carrion beetles that pollinate it. More than 5500 people came to ogle the 1.5-meter flower, whose giant purple petal, or spathe, measured 75 cm across before its cone unceremoniously toppled on 27 June.

Life's Early Glimmers

Fossils aren't very colorful. But some of them used to be: A zoologist has found that some Cambrian creatures that roamed the sea floor 515 million years ago were iridescent, a development he believes was one of many triggered by the emergence of vision. The find, described in the 7 June *Proceedings: Biological Sciences of the Royal Society*, comes from the fossil-rich Burgess Shale of British Columbia.

***Wiwaxia*'s iridescent spines might have warned off predators.**

AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

The creatures' color came not from pigments but diffraction gratings—parallel ridges spaced at about the wavelength of visible light. In 1995, invertebrate zoologist Andrew Parker of the Australian Museum in Sydney found diffraction gratings in living crustaceans called ostracodes, which flash iridescent hues while courting. Later, he noticed lines similar to those on ostracodes on reconstructions of Burgess Shale organisms. Although these were too coarse to be diffraction gratings, inspection of actual fossils with an electron microscope revealed traces of the gratings on the spines, scales, and hairs of several creatures: the armored *Wiwaxia*, the worm-like *Canadia*, and the swimmer *Marrella*. Because all gratings split incoming light into its component wavelengths, Parker was able to use optical equations to calculate that the creatures could flash a wide range of colors—perhaps to warn off predators.

Paleontologist James Valentine of the University of California, Berkeley, says the finding helps bring the Burgess Shale animals to life: "It really makes you think about the animals running around flickering and shining in the light."