



### MEDICAL PHILANTHROPY

## Colorado Nobelist Chosen To Lead Howard Hughes

Joining a list of world-class life scientists who have taken on major management positions without abandoning their research, chemist Thomas Cech has been named as the next president of the \$11 billion Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI). The 51-year-old Cech, who won the 1989 Nobel Prize for his work on the enzymatic activity of RNA—which influences everything from the origin of life to treating diseases—will keep his lab at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where he is an HHMI investigator. In doing so, he is following in the steps of fellow Nobelists Harold Varmus, who leads the

university-based investigators.

Cech's colleagues think he's just the person to continue building HHMI. "It's a great call," says Nobel laureate J. Michael Bishop, chancellor of the University of California, San Francisco. "I couldn't think of anyone better."

In taking the new job, Cech resisted the HHMI board's initial request that he shut down his HHMI-funded lab. "Things are going so well in the research lab, I hate to interrupt it," he says about recent work on x-ray crystallography of RNA and the study of telomerase, an enzyme that helps dividing cells protect their chromosomes. The board eventually agreed to let Cech spend 1 week a month in Colorado.

Heading the Chevy Chase, Maryland-based organization, however, means reducing his HHMI funding and downscaling his lab. Cech says he'll give up many outside activities, too, including his work with biotechnology companies. Cech also is a deputy editor of *Science*, a job he says he may keep without compensation. Cech's salary has not yet been made public; Choppin earned \$600,000 last year.

Cech declined to discuss his plans for HHMI but says he is particularly interested in merging biology with other disciplines, bioinformatics, and science education. He'd also like to explore ways to mesh HHMI's research program, which last year gave its investigators \$424 million, with the grants program that spent another \$99 million on science education, postdoctoral training of physicians, and an international scholarship program for researchers.

One perennial management issue is resource allocation. Yale University's Sidney Altman, who shared the 1989 Nobel with Cech, says HHMI is "open to a lot of criticism" about who and what it funds. "They can't help but fund people who would be funded otherwise," says Altman about its ongoing support for genetics, immunology, and neuroscience. He says HHMI is at its best when it exercises leadership in a field,

like it did 20 years ago in helping to build up structural biology.

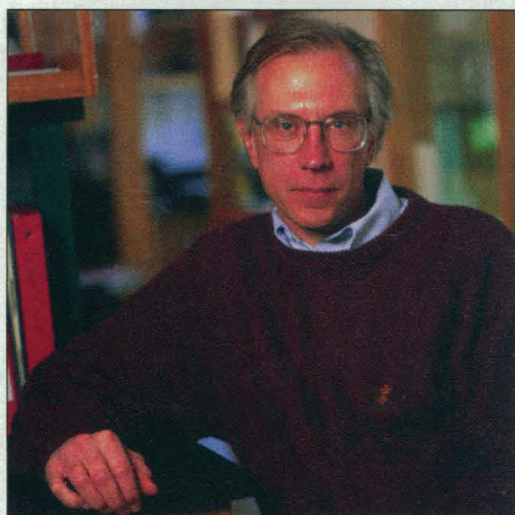
Cech concedes that there might be questions about his abilities to manage an organization as big as HHMI, with more than 2500 employees and an annual budget that exceeds half a billion dollars. "I've never run anything larger than my research group," he says. But he says he's learned a lot in the past decade from sitting on the boards of several large research institutions. A former researcher in his lab, Michael Been of Duke University, says Cech is an excellent manager who "handles a lot at once, and very efficiently."

Running HHMI does have its downside, however. For his wife, Carol, vice president at Baxter Hemoglobin Therapeutics, it means leaving her job and moving to the Washington, D.C., area. "I'm really grateful that she's seen it possible to allow us to do this as a family, even though it's not a good career move for her," he says.

To Cech, the Hughes presidency is "a bit of a dream job," allowing him to have a "high impact" on the direction of science without having to raise money. Columbia University neuroscientist and fellow HHMI investigator Eric Kandel says Cech's task will be made easier by HHMI's wealth and the absence of any looming crises. "Cech can do visionary things," says Kandel. "It's not like walking into your typical academic situation, where you have enormous debts and the faculty is demoralized and worried about health care. The faculty does not bitch at Hughes."

Although Hughes's financial stability is part of what attracted Cech, the diversity it fosters may also present him with his biggest challenge. "Tom has to find his way through the forest," says Altman. "But he's a very creative scientist, and I'm sure he'll do fine."

—JON COHEN



**Long reach.** Thomas Cech will keep his Colorado lab when he becomes president of HHMI.

National Institutes of Health, and David Baltimore, president of the California Institute of Technology, as well as Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences.

Cech replaces current HHMI president Purnell Choppin, who is retiring in December after 12 years. With the help of chief scientific officer Maxwell Cowan, who is staying on—and an endowment that has more than doubled to \$11.4 billion during his tenure—Choppin established HHMI as a leading supporter of basic biology research through its network of more than 300

### SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

## Research Shutdown Roils Los Angeles VA

In a stunning one-two punch from the federal government, all research projects affiliated with the Veterans Administration (VA) in Los Angeles, California, were put on indefinite hold last week. On 22 March, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced that the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System could no longer conduct human studies supported by NIH's parent, the De-

CREDIT: PAUL FLETTERS/HHMI