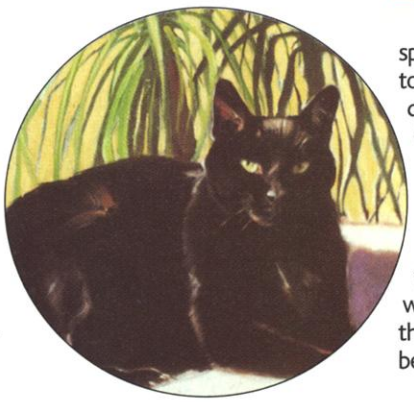
Cat-Acting Vaccine

Good news for ailurophiles: Allergy-prone children may actually be better off with a cat in the house.

Allergist Thomas Platts-Mills and co-workers at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville measured antibody levels in 226 schoolchildren and related the numbers to levels of allergens from dust mites and cats measured in the children's homes. The scientists were surprised to find that children with the highest exposure to cat allergen actually had lower levels of IgE—the antibody that apparently triggers allergic reactions and asthma—than did children with moderate cat exposure. High cat exposure did trigger production of a second type of antibody: IgG, which doesn't elicit such a severe inflammatory response and which may help build tolerance. The cat response is quite different from that evoked by dust mites, where the greater the exposure, the more IgE antibodies are generated.



Purr-tection?

The study, which appears in the 10 March *Lancet*, adds to evidence that children living with cats are less likely than those in catless households to become allergic to the animals.

Bengt Bjorksten of Linköping University in Sweden says the research suggests there are probably other allergens that may protect some people against allergic responses. In fact, researchers have observed a similar response in beekeepers who seem immune to bee venom.

NIH FAVORITES IN 2000

Rank	Institution	Funding ($ millions)
1	Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore	419.4
2	University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia	321.3
3	University of Washington, Seattle	302.5
4	University of California, San Francisco	295.3
5	Washington University, St. Louis	279.5
6	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	260.4
7	Harvard University, Cambridge, MA	250.4
8	University of California, Los Angeles	243.6
9	Yale University, New Haven, CT	242.8
10	Columbia University, New York City	226.7

Johns Hopkins University once again tops the list of recipients of funds from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), according to preliminary 2000 figures released by the U.S. government's biomedical megafunder. Only one school that made the top 10 3 years ago—Stanford University—slipped off the list, dropping from ninth to 12th place. It's been replaced by Columbia University, which was 11th in 1997. NIH funding for these heavyweights grew by roughly 40% from 1997 to 2000—keeping pace with the expansion of NIH's budget over the same period.

Sacked Over a Map

Tensions over the Bush Administration's desire to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge are causing jitters at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), where a flap over a flawed map of caribou calving grounds has led to the dismissal of a contractor and a flurry of outrage on the Internet.

Ian Thomas, a cartographer contracted to make bird maps at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland, liked to post maps on all manner of conservation topics—from tiger habitats to Chinese land cover—on his site. On 7 March, he put up one cobbled together from several government maps that purported to show areas in the arctic refuge needed by caribou. When USGS caribou biologist Brad Griffith in Alaska saw it, he e-mailed Thomas to take it off the Web, saying it was out of date, overestimated habitat needs, and was "completely inappropriate." The matter quickly reached Patuxent officials, who say it is only the latest instance of Thomas straying into unapproved activities. On 12 March, Patuxent brass barred Thomas from his computer and shut down his site for "peer review."

Thomas, undeterred, is now temporarily at the World Wildlife Fund and has a new Web site (www.maptricks.com), where he says his dismissal is meant to be "an example to other Federal scientists" of what can happen if they don't keep their hands off hot issues. Some at Patuxent agree. If the map had concerned "chickadees in Chincoteague," he'd still be on the job, says zoologist Sam Droege.

Trial for "Ethnic" Drug

What is being touted as the "first ethnic drug"—a heart drug for African Americans—is about to be tested in clinical trials.

In the United States, blacks are more likely than whites to develop congestive heart failure and are roughly twice as likely to die of the disease. Nor do they benefit as much from ACE inhibitors, the front-line drug therapy. NitroMed, a company in New Bedford, Massachusetts, now has a drug called BiDil that it hopes will address the problem. On 17 March, it announced that it has won Food and Drug Administration (FDA) clearance for an all-black clinical trial.

Black patients may have an inherited physiological difference that causes them to respond to ACE inhibitors with lower nitric oxide (NO) levels than whites, limiting the effect, says Jay Cohn, a heart researcher at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. BiDil—which combines two vasodilators with an NO source—may help, says Cohn, who invented the drug and licensed it to NitroMed. Although BiDil showed little effect on mortality in a study done in the 1980s, Cohn's analysis of a subset of patients suggests that blacks benefited. Based on this, FDA agreed to a 2-year trial that will test BiDil and other drugs on 600 black patients at 100 sites.

Other researchers are intrigued but wary. "I'm skeptical of the approach," because it substitutes skin color for genetic analysis, says Marc Pfeffer of Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Conceding the point, a NitroMed official says "we're searching for a better diagnostic" to target the therapy.

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