dent Yuri Osipov.

If the presidium had confined itself to these mergers, its reforms might have won broad acclaim. But Mesyats also used the meeting to announce that the new divisions will be divided into sectors, each of which would elect members to the academy. These new barriers between RAS scientists could lead to new research-stifling fiefdoms, says Alexander Krasovsky, an academician at the Military Aviation Technical University in Moscow. "Instead of freeing the academy of the swollen administrative machinery, the reform has forged new links in the managerial chain," he says. And that, some fear, is akin to adding subdivisions in a scientific Potemkin village.

–VLADIMIR POKROVSKY AND ANDREI ALLAKHVERDOV

Vladimir Pokrovsky and Andrei Allakhverdov are writers in Moscow.

SMALLPOX RESEARCH

World Health Body Fires Starting Gun

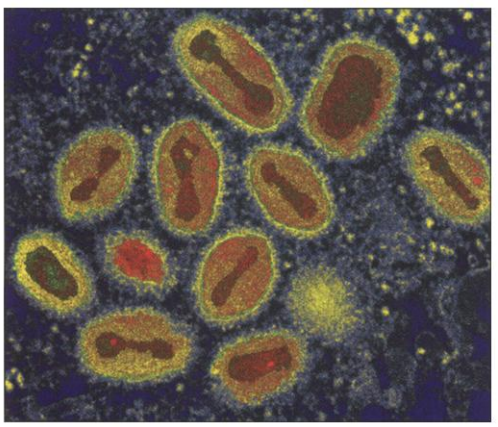
CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—The privileged few who study one of the world's most notorious viruses now have an unfamiliar luxury: boundless time. On 18 May, the World Health Organization's (WHO's) top decision-making body approved a recommendation to delay destruction of the world's two known stocks of smallpox, held under tight guard in Russia and the United States. And, to the surprise of many at last week's meeting of the World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva, anticipated calls for a new destruction date failed to materialize.

A year ago, WHO was poised to approve incineration of the stocks—the last known samples of live virus after the disease was eradicated from the wild—by the end of 2002. But the 11 September attacks, followed by the anthrax-tainted letter campaign, heightened fears that smallpox could be resurrected from clandestine stocks or, less plausibly, diverted from sanctioned stocks. Those disturbing scenarios prompted WHO's governing board last January to recommend extending the virus's stay on death row. The reprieve could permit Russia, the United States, and collaborating countries to develop modern diagnostics, safer vaccines, and drugs against the disease (*Science*, 15 March, p. 2001).

WHA's imprimatur allows this loosely coordinated program to shift into high gear. "For scientists, it's really good news," says Antonio Alcami of the University of Cambridge, U.K., a mousepox expert and WHO adviser. He notes that potential smallpox studies—part of a batch of biodefense projects that a U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases panel will review for funding next month—could now proceed with confidence that any promising vaccines or drugs they turn up could be pitted against live virus.

Indeed, smallpox researchers may have more breathing room than expected. Last January, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Sha Zukang, implored the agency to set a new date for destruction (*Science*, 25 January, p. 598). China backed off this demand at the WHA meeting. According to Lev Sandakhchiev, director of the Russian smallpox repository in Koltsovo, this "may mean that we have another 5 to 7 years [of research] ahead of us."

–RICHARD STONE



CREDITS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) MARKUS GEISEN/NHM; MECKES, GELDERBLOM/EYE OF SCIENCE/PHOTO RESEARCHERS

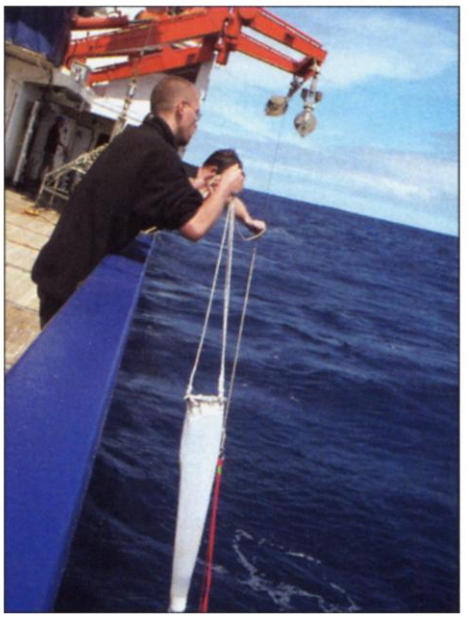
Not dead yet. Last week's WHA decision paves the way for research on live smallpox virus for the next several years.

U.K. RESEARCH

Accounting Error Leads To Funding Drought

CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—A major British research funding agency has canceled an entire round of grants, worth $19 million, in an attempt to fend off a cash crisis. Last week's decision by the Natural Environmental Research Council (NERC) has infuriated scientists in fields ranging from atmospheric and polar sciences to freshwater biology. "The long-term damage will be to the career structure of young scientists" who find themselves without a project this year, says Ekhard Salje, head of earth sciences at Cambridge University.

NERC is one of seven agencies that channel government money into academic research. Its current woes stem from a failure in its new accounting system and overspending on staff salaries last year. In a statement last week, NERC announced that the cruel double whammy, its own doing, has forced it to save $28 million this year, although NERC has asked the government to contribute $8.5 million to lessen the blow.



Loss of talent? Cancellation of NERC funding may force Britain's young scientists abroad.

The agency will find most of the savings by canceling its first of two rounds of 3-year research grants planned for 2002, forcing researchers on as many as 50 projects to seek funding elsewhere. Aspiring grantees must now wait until December for the next round. "It was a regrettable decision that was not taken lightly," says David Brown, NERC's director of science programs. "If there was any other course of action we would have taken it." He says that other programs, such as NERC's small grants, studentships, and prestigious fellowships, are unaffected.

Researchers are dismayed by the lost opportunity and the major blow that it will deal to departments that rely heavily on NERC money, says Salje. Many of the students in his own department at Cambridge, he notes, are funded through the standard grants program. "We won't be able to educate the next generation of young scientists," he says. In some cases, labs in other countries will benefit from NERC's accounting error. Ph.D. student Markus Geisen of the Natural History Museum in London was to lead a research project on a micropaleontology grant this summer but says he now plans to skip over to Germany for a short-term contract researching coccolith biology.

Brown says that NERC will seek more money for the December round of grants if it receives a flood of strong proposals. However, paleontologist Jeremy Young of the Natural History Museum, who was hoping to employ Geisen, doesn't know what to expect come December. "The competition … will be very high," he predicts. "It is going to cause absolute chaos." **–JULIA DAY**

Julia Day is an intern in the Cambridge, U.K., office of *Science*.