



Splitting up
Stanford/UCSF
hospitals merger fails
to convince critics
p5



Relativity values
NASA gravity
experiment hits
technical snag
p7



Extreme reaction
US primate
researchers facing
protests and threats
p7



Fellow feeling
'Marie Curie'
fellows seek a
political profile
p9

Life science facilities in crisis as Brussels switches off funding

Paris

Several major European life-science research facilities face financial crisis following the European Commission's decision not to fund their operational costs out of the fifth five-year Framework programme (FP5).

One facility directly affected is the European Bioinformatics Institute (EBI) in Cambridge, which forms Europe's main database infrastructure for molecular biology and biotechnology. An outstation of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), EBI has relied on the European Union for almost half its budget, but now finds that this tap has suddenly been switched off.

Other facilities affected are the recently created European Mouse Mutant Archive, based at Monterotondo near Rome (see next page), and the *Drosophila* stock centres at Umeå in Sweden and Szeged in Hungary.

Under instruction from member states, the European Commission published a new rule in March stating that core funding and operational costs for infrastructure should not qualify for support from FP5, which runs from 1998 to 2002. Member states wanted to control investment decisions on large science facilities themselves, and preferred such funding to be provided directly.

But EBI failed to recognize the rule's significance, especially since research infrastructure was made a priority in FP5, with funding rising from 200 million euros (US\$212 million) in the previous Framework programme to 500 million euros for this one. EBI had not read the small print specifying that such funds would be used only for research projects and to fund researchers from one country working at facilities in another.

Realization dawned over the summer, when the European Commission rejected EBI's applications for Framework funds. No one doubts the scientific excellence of EBI, says one commission official. "They were simply outside the scope of funding."

Embarrassed commission officials are now advising EBI on how to rewrite their proposals to include areas that will meet the new funding criteria. But one official admits that sleights of hand, such as dressing up



Hard times ahead? The European Bioinformatics Institute in Cambridge faces a funding problem.

infrastructure costs as research projects, are no longer an option. A spate of financial scandals prompted the commission to resign *en masse* earlier this year, and in the new squeaky-clean climate the commission is applying the rules to the letter.

As a result, funding for EBI from existing European Union contracts will dry up at the end of the year, and EBI accountants estimate that the shortfall will form 44 per cent of its budget. If the immediate cash-flow problem is not resolved, "we will have to abandon major projects like the DNA database, the draft human genome, the macromolecular structure database and the

microarray expression database," warns Graham Cameron, who jointly heads the institute with Michael Ashburner, professor of biology at the University of Cambridge.

The crisis has come at a bad time for EBI. Demand for its services is growing at 15 per cent every month, while the *Drosophila* genome is likely to be available in February, with a draft of the human genome in the spring (see *Nature* 401, 729–730; 1999).

The need for EBI to expand is widely supported (see Correspondence, page 12). The institute and many in the community it serves believe its annual budget should be doubled from its current \$8 million if it is to remain competitive with its US equivalent, the National Center for Biotechnology Information, which has a budget of \$19 million.

The EMBL board will meet later this month to try to drum up money from its member states to tide EBI over until a permanent solution is found. Most observers are optimistic that the money will be found, as they argue that it would be unthinkable to let EBI sink.

"Everyone realizes that this is really a small amount of money for so many countries to put together to keep Europe competitive," says Julio Celis, chairman of the EMBL

South Africa says AIDS drug 'toxic'

Cape Town

South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki last week said the country would not take the "irresponsible" step of supplying AZT (zidovudine) to HIV and AIDS sufferers until the drug's safety was established.

The statement is being seen as an attempt to justify the government's tardiness in making AZT available in state hospitals, even to rape victims and pregnant women.

Mbeki claimed that legal cases were pending in South Africa, the United States and Britain against the use of AZT on the grounds that it was harmful.

But this has been strongly denied by Peter Moore, medical director for sub-Saharan Africa for Glaxo Wellcome, the

drug's suppliers, who have requested a meeting with Mbeki to clarify the issue. The company has been negotiating with the government for the past three years over the price of supplying the drug to state hospitals.

Mbeki's statement was made in his first address to the National Council of Provinces since he became president in June. He argued that a large body of scientific literature claimed that AZT is so toxic as to be a health hazard. He had asked national health minister Manto Tshabala-Msimang to investigate this, but said that, until her investigation was complete, it would be irresponsible for the government to ignore researchers' warnings.

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