

University of Colorado) whose task has been to help the foundation manage the parsimonious years ahead.

McCray and his colleagues have been thinking the unthinkable with a vengeance. If there is no overall increase in the astronomy budget, they say, it will be necessary to close most of the telescopes at Kitt Peak National Observatory in Arizona. That is the unthinkable. McCray also entertains the notion (part of his remit) that there may be either a minimal or a modest increase of the budget of the National Optical Astronomy Observatories (NOAO), which operate Kitt Peak and the Cerro Tololo Interamerican Observatory in Chile. NOAO's difficulty is its commitment to the Gemini project, two new 8-metre telescopes in Hawaii and Chile now being built, which will cost about \$8 million a year to operate. With a minimal increase, other facilities will have to be closed. With a modest increase, NOAO may be able to scrape by.

Closing a substantial part of Kitt Peak is unthinkable because the US national astronomy observatories are a cultural treasure, and not just for the United States. They allow access to world-class telescopes solely on the basis of scientific merit, without regard to the passports of those who use them. McCray wants to keep that principle, but his panel also rightly asks that modern facilities should have precedence over older facilities. That is why Kitt Peak, where most of the telescopes are more than 20 years old, is vulnerable. But apart from its international connections, half of US astronomers depend on Kitt Peak for optical observations in the Northern Hemisphere.

The McCray panel has an ingenious idea for softening that blow: why not make a deal with the private observatories that now control the bulk of the collecting area in the United States? (The 10-metre Keck telescope comprises a large fraction of that total.) The proposal is that they should sell some of their observing time to NSF, spending what they earn on instrumentation, perhaps at the rate of \$4.5 million a year. That could make up for the well-known unwillingness of private benefactors to spend funds on instruments rather than on telescopes. But successful deal-making would require growth in the NSF budget not yet assured.

Meanwhile, NSF has decided that there is no point in building major new scientific facilities without knowing where the operating funds will come from. Future projects, such as the millimetre-wave array (recommended by Bahcall) will be approved only when operating funds have been identified. CERN, the high-energy physics laboratory at Geneva, has always budgeted in that way, with admirable success. If that means fewer new projects in the future, the price may well be worth the benefit of letting the community know where it stands.

Early in this year's US budget cycle, nobody can yet tell which of McCray's assumptions (if any) will apply to NSF's planning for the financial year beginning on 1 October, but the new Congress is making ominous noises. Its members should therefore acknowledge two features of US public support for the exploration of the Universe. First, the national observatories have been among the principal sources of the wealth of new knowledge gathered in recent decades, to the delight of taxpayers in the United States and else-

where. Second, McCray's careful introspection about NSF's financial dilemma has not been matched by a comparable examination of NASA and its many works, some of which have astronomical connotations.

It would of course be folly to abandon the Hubble Space Telescope now that it is working superbly. But it would be an equal folly to close Kitt Peak simply because it is 20 years old. Why not take the knife to the space station instead? If the space station could be postponed for a single month, the saving in interest charges would provide a decade's worth of the modest increase over which the McCray panel has been drooling. A cost-conscious Congress should think on that. □

## Names for hi-jacking

**"Taxol" is a trademark now, but Bristol-Myers Squibb should return it to the research community.**

EVERYBODY knows what is meant by the English noun "rock". It has three principal uses, in references to stones (that may be thrown), geological deposits (that may be laid down) and a form of rhythmic and cacophonous music, much enjoyed by young people. So what would happen if some recording company were able to proclaim that others should not use the term in any of those meanings on the grounds that "Rock" had become the trademark of its own brand of music? There would, of course, be a revolution. What geologists would do, and to whom, is too dreadful to imagine.

Sadly, there will be no such reaction to the exercise of similar claims by Bristol-Myers Squibb, the US pharmaceutical manufacturer, which has appropriated the word "taxol" for use as a trademark, with the willing but naive consent of the OPT. When *Nature* last year published an account of the total synthesis of this antileukaemia substance (Nicolaou, K. C. *et al. Nature* **367**, 630-634; 1994), a vice-president of the company wrote to say that "taxol" is a proprietary name and should not be used generically and, that "paclitaxel" is the approved alternative.

For the past two decades, the word "taxol" has been a generic name for a material extracted from the bark of the Pacific yew. It was so used in a paper describing the isolation and structure of the compound in 1971 (Wani, M.C. *et al. J. Amer. Chem. Soc.* **93**, 2325-2327; 1971). Bristol-Myers appears to have inherited its trademark from Continental Laboratories Ltd, which registered the name in 1939 to describe a "pluriglandular product to regulate the intestines". In 1992, Bristol-Myers applied for (and was granted) protection of the same name to refer to its "anti-cancer preparations", making a passing reference to the earlier protection for something quite different.

Bristol-Myers should be ashamed of itself. If it values its relationships with the research community, it should voluntarily relinquish the protection it has won "in more than 60 countries". Meanwhile, the US president or one of his underlings might usefully enquire why the trademarks examiners were asleep in 1992. □