

Snow blocks US efforts to tackle research grant applications backlog

Washington. The main science-funding agencies in Washington have now been closed by political events or the weather for a month, throwing the federal grant application process into chaos. Snow closed the agencies for most of last week, and they expected to reopen for business only on Tuesday, 16 January, the day after the Martin Luther King holiday and 32 days since most of them were first shut down by political disagreement, on 15 December.

A break in the snow last Thursday gave officials at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Science Foundation and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration a brief chance to survey the mountain of mail accrued since then. "It will be months before it will be business as usual," says Wendy Baldwin, deputy director for extramural research at NIH, which is postponing most planned grant review meetings up to mid-February, to allow time for adequate preparation. □

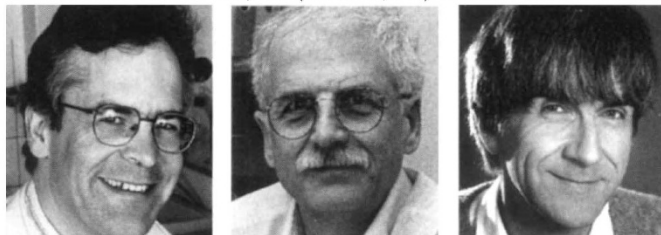
Japanese astronaut retrieves raft

Tokyo. Koichi Wakata, the Japanese astronaut on the US space shuttle Endeavour, successfully completed a major experiment for Japan's space agencies on 13 January when he plucked a re-usable orbital platform, the Space Flyer Unit (SFU), out of orbit with the shuttle's robot arm. The SFU was launched in March to carry out experiments including materials testing for the Japanese Experimental Module of the US space station, growth of crystals under microgravity, and breeding of newts under zero gravity (see *Nature* 374, 295; 1995).

At one point the SFU's solar panel failed to close properly as the shuttle closed to within tens of metres of the platform. The problem was overcome by jettisoning the panel, and Wakata was able to manoeuvre the \$0.4-billion platform into the cargo hold. □

Three awarded prize for medicine

London. The 1996 Louis-Jeantet prize for medicine will be awarded to Björn Dahlbäck (below, left) of the University of Lund, Sweden, Ulrich Laemmli (centre), of the University of Geneva, Switzerland, and Nigel Unwin (right) of the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB), United Kingdom. The winners will each receive SFr600,000 (US\$517,000) towards their research



and a personal award of SFr100,000. The prize — awarded annually since 1986, and named after its benefactor, a wealthy French businessman who died in 1981 — will be presented at a ceremony in Geneva in April.

Unwin has collaborated with a past prize-winner, his colleague Richard Henderson, director designate of the LMB (see p193). □

France limits embryo implantations

Paris. The Paris Supreme Court of Appeals last week rejected an appeal by a woman seeking to be implanted with an embryo created by her and her husband before the latter's death in an accident last year. The court's ruling in the test case confirms that *in vitro* fertilization in France is limited to "living, sterile couples (a male and a female) of reproductive age".

The woman has described the situation as a "revolting" infringement of personal liberty and questioned the ethics of the court's ruling that the embryos could be given to another couple, pointing out

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