IN brief

NIH injects \$275 million into undiagnosed diseases and RNA research

In July, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH)'s Common Fund announced pledges of \$145 million for research into undiagnosed diseases and \$130 million to study extracellular RNA communication. These areas represent "key roadblocks in biomedical research and...emerging scientific opportunities ripe for Common Fund investment," according to Elizabeth Wilder, director of the NIH's Office of Strategic Coordination, which manages the program. The Common Fund, established in 2006, is a \$545-million pot of discretionary money, to support research that cuts across institutes. The NIH's Undiagnosed Diseases Program (UDP) joined the National Human Genome Research Institute, the NIH Office of Rare Diseases Research and the NIH Clinical Center together in an effort to serve patients with mystery diseases that have eluded diagnoses. Since its inception in 2008, more than 200 cases have been tackled by the UDP. With the new funding, UDP will go extramural (the projects up until now have been intramural) to establish a network of medical research centers that will leverage advances in genomics to

gain understanding of the mechanisms underlying these conditions, and improve their diagnosis and treatment. An estimated 6% of the US population suffers from such conditions. The Extracellular RNA Communication program, meanwhile, will explore how RNA is released from cells and packaged for transport, and then interacts with and influences specific cell types and functions. This offers a chance to "transform our understanding of endocrinology and intercellular communication," Wilder says, as well as provide opportunities for diagnostics and therapeutics. This initiative will launch in fiscal 2013 and run for five years. Further details on the Undiagnosed Diseases Program are expected in fiscal year 2014.

Malory Allison

China's key R&D programs behind schedule

Ninety three per cent of projects that comprise China's National Key Science and Technology (S&T) Schemes had not finished their tasks by 2011, the end of the first stage, according to the Chinese National Audit Office (CNAO) in Beijing. Launched in 2009 and funding a range of activities from innovative drug development to airplane manufacturing, China's 16 key S&T schemes plan to spend some 600 billion

yuan (\$95 billion) in three stages by 2020 to attain the world's leadership in key fields. In a report presented on June 27 to the National People's Congress, China's legislature, Auditor General Jiayi Liu described an audit of 8 of the 16 S&T schemes, although he did not reveal which projects had been audited. According to Liu's report, 134 projects failed to meet their milestones, yet continued to receive funding for their next stages. Furthermore, 582 of the 2,401 sets of research results randomly examined by CNAO had been replaced by results from other projects. For the drug development scheme, the central government invested nearly 6 billion yuan (\$882.5 million) in support of more than 900 drug development projects and technology platforms by the end of 2011. A Tianjin-based bio-entrepreneur, Zailin Yu, president of SinoBiotech, whose project was among those audited by CNAO, says "The reason [that so many projects failed to reach their milestones] is because the scheme's goal to develop the world's leading innovative drugs is unrealistic." Rigid financial management and late allotment of funding also contribute to the failure to finish tasks, he adds. Liu reported that institutions and researchers involved in the audit have promised to correct their problems and improve management of their research funding.

Hepeng Jia

Around the world in a month