

	435	This Week in <i>Science</i>
Editorial	437	A Time for Steadiness: C. J. PINGS
Letters	439	Punctuated Equilibrium: Empirical Response: S. J. GOULD ■ Defining Risk: A. WILDAVSKY ■ Overhead Costs on Research Grants: J. ARDITTI
News & Comment	440	Bloch Prepares NSF for Lean Years
	441	Fill the Oil Reserve, Academy Report Says
	443	Pentagon's R&D Chief Roils the Waters ■ Hicks Attacks SDI Critics ■ Packard Panel Urges Reforms
	446	<i>Briefing</i> : USDA Suspends License for Engineered Vaccine ■ Laser Fusion Program Burdened by Overclassification ■ Smithsonian Photobiology Lab to Close ■ European Commission Proposes Shift in Joint Research
Research News	448	Researchers Hunt for Alzheimer's Disease Gene
	450	<i>Briefing</i> : Mountain Goat Horn: A Clue to Extinction?
	451	Consensus on Silicon Surface Structure Near ■ STM Evidence for Silicon (111)
Articles	459	Sex Differences in Economic Well-Being: V. R. FUCHS
	464	Design of Sequence-Specific DNA-Binding Molecules: P. B. DERVAN
	472	Diamonds and the African Lithosphere: F. R. BOYD and J. J. GURNEY
Research Articles	477	Biochemical and Genetic Evidence for the Hepatitis B Virus Replication Strategy: C. SEEGER, D. GANEM, H. E. VARMUS
Reports	485	Potential Metal-Binding Domains in Nucleic Acid Binding Proteins: J. M. BERG
	487	Occurrence of Peptide and Clavine Ergot Alkaloids in Tall Fescue Grass: P. C. LYONS, R. D. PLATTNER, C. W. BACON
	489	<i>De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum</i> : A Spiral Center for Taste in the Brain of the Teleost Fish, <i>Heterotis niloticus</i> : M. R. BRAFORD, JR.
	491	Molecular Analysis of the t(2;14) Translocation of Childhood Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia: H. P. FELL, R. G. SMITH, P. W. TUCKER
	494	Interspecific Genetic Control of Courtship Song Production and Reception in <i>Drosophila</i> : C. P. KYRIACOU and J. C. HALL
	497	Bioavailability of Dioxin in Soil from a 2,4,5-T Manufacturing Site: T. H. UMBRETT, E. J. HESSE, M. A. GALLO

■ SCIENCE is published weekly on Friday, except the last week in December, and with a plus issue in May by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. Second-class postage (publication No. 484460) paid at Washington, DC, and at an additional entry. Now combined with *The Scientific Monthly* © Copyright © 1986 by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Domestic individual membership and subscription (51 issues): \$65. Domestic institutional subscription (51 issues): \$98. Foreign postage extra: Canada \$24, other (surface mail) \$27, air-surface via Amsterdam \$65. First class, airmail, school-year, and student rates on request. Single copies \$2.50 (\$3 by mail); back issues \$4 (\$4.50 by mail); Biotechnology issue, \$5.50 (\$6 by mail); classroom rates on request. **Change of address:** allow 6 weeks, giving old and new addresses and seven-digit account number. Authorization to photocopy material for internal or personal use under circumstances not falling within the fair use provisions of the Copyright Act is granted by AAAS to libraries and other users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transactional Reporting Service, provided that the base fee of \$1 per copy plus \$0.10 per page is paid directly to CCC, 21 Congress Street, Salem, Massachusetts 01970. The identification code for *Science* is 0036-8075/83 \$1 + .10. **Postmaster:** Send Form 3579 to *Science*, 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. *Science* is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and in several specialized indexes.

■ The American Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in 1848 and incorporated in 1874. Its objects are to further the work of scientists, to facilitate cooperation among them, to foster scientific freedom and responsibility, to improve the effectiveness of science in the promotion of human welfare, and to increase public understanding and appreciation of the importance and promise of the methods of science in human progress.



COVER Pseudocolor digitized computer image of fluorescence intensity distribution in human fibroblasts stained with carboxyfluorescein diacetate. Fluorescence in a cell can be bleached with a laser and intercellular communication assayed by rapidly and repeatedly measuring the redistribution of carboxyfluorescein in bleached and unbleached cells. Addition of tumor promoting agents can block the intercellular communication. See page 525. [Margaret H. Wade, Meridian Instruments, Inc., Okemos, Michigan, and James E. Trosko and Melvin Schindler, Michigan State University, East Lansing 48824]

- 500 Selectivity of Intracellular Proteolysis: Protein Substrates Activate the ATP-Dependent Protease (La): L. WAXMAN and A. L. GOLDBERG
- 503 Restoration by Calmodulin of a Ca^{2+} -Dependent K^+ Current Missing in a Mutant of *Paramecium*: R. D. HINRICHSSEN, A. BURGESS-CASSLER, B. C. SOLTVEDT, T. HENNESSEY, C. KUNG
- 506 Induction of Macrophage Tumoricidal Activity by Granulocyte-Macrophage Colony-Stimulating Factor: K. H. GRABSTEIN, D. L. URDAL, R. J. TUSHINSKI, D. Y. MOCHIZUKI, V. L. PRICE, M. A. CANTRELL, S. GILLIS, P. J. CONLON
- 508 The Neuroendocrine Thymus: Coexistence of Oxytocin and Neurophysin in the Human Thymus: V. GEENEN, J.-J. LEGROS, P. FRANCHIMONT, M. BAUDRIHAYE, M.-P. DEFRESNE, J. BONIVER
- 511 Receptor-Associated Resistance to Growth Hormone-Releasing Factor in Dwarf "Little" Mice: J.-O. JANSSON, T. R. DOWNS, W. G. BEAMER, L. A. FROHMAN
- 513 Cerebellar Vermis: Essential for Long-Term Habituation of the Acoustic Startle Response: R. N. LEATON and W. F. SUPPLE, JR.
- 515 Calcium Antagonist Receptors in Cardiomyopathic Hamster: Selective Increases in Heart, Muscle, Brain: J. A. WAGNER, I. J. REYNOLDS, H. F. WEISMAN, P. DUDECK, M. L. WEISFELDT, S. H. SNYDER
- 518 Gene Transfer and Molecular Cloning of the Human NGF Receptor: M. V. CHAO, M. A. BOTHWELL, A. H. ROSS, H. KOPROWSKI, A. A. LANAHAN, C. R. BUCK, A. SEHGAL
- 522 Abnormal Proteins Serve as Eukaryotic Stress Signals and Trigger the Activation of Heat Shock Genes: J. ANANTHAN, A. L. GOLDBERG, R. VOELLMY
- 525 A Fluorescence Photobleaching Assay of Gap Junction-Mediated Communication Between Human Cells: M. H. WADE, J. E. TROSKO, M. SCHINDLER

Book Reviews

- 531 In the Name of Eugenics, reviewed by E. A. CARLSON ■ From Maxwell to Microphysics, D. M. SIEGEL ■ Beringia in the Cenozoic Era, D. F. MURRAY ■ Biology of Australasian Frogs and Reptiles, F. H. POUGH ■ Reprints of Books Previously Reviewed ■ Books Received

Products & Materials

- 535 Tissue Processor ■ Viscometer ■ Software for Chemical Safety ■ Scanning Electron Microscope ■ Microcentrifuge ■ Biohazard Disposal ■ Research Detection of AIDS Antibodies ■ Probe Technology ■ Supercomputer

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Instructions for contributors appears on page xi of the 28 March 1986 issue. Editorial correspondence, including requests for permission to reprint and reprint orders, should be sent to 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. Telephone: 202-326-6500.

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A Time for Steadiness

Forty years ago Vannevar Bush challenged the nation to establish and maintain a peacetime science program on major university campuses. Congress responded with authorization, appropriation, and oversight. Since then we have been learning how to make that partnership work, with trust and mutual confidence. Now that partnership seems deeply periled. On 12 February, the Office of Management and Budget unilaterally issued a change in Circular A-21, the guidelines determining the recovery of research costs.

Basically, OMB decided that this 40-year partnership between government and universities—a partnership that has taken us into space, conquered disease, defended us, improved our quality of life, and made us the food basket of the world—needed to be changed quickly, unilaterally, and fundamentally. The principles that costs are to be fully identified and reimbursed and that consultation over major changes should occur, are central to the partnership. By its action, OMB made clear that either it misunderstood or rejected these principles.

This is not a budget problem. We have lived with budget cuts before and can do so again. Nor is it a problem with indirect costs. All of us recognize and share with principal investigators the commitment to contain these costs wherever possible. The problem is the lack of consultation with the academic community on an issue that has major consequences for the conduct of research in this country.

It is not that our consultative relationships have been sundered. It is that they have been ignored. Discussions on these issues move ahead in the White House and Congress. The President's own White House Science Council Panel on the Health of U.S. Universities and Colleges, chaired by David Packard and D. Allan Bromley, has prepared an important and comprehensive report on these very matters, and this report has been circulating in draft for several months. And these arrangements are now being systematically examined by a task force on science policy of the House Committee on Science and Technology under the chairmanship of Don Fuqua. These are serious inquiries being conducted with impartiality and care.

The treatment by OMB of A-21 is not by any means the only critical issue. We have a broader problem. Rule changes are being proposed on many fronts in response to budgetary pressures. For example, in February, the director of the National Science Foundation advised the university community that science faculty salaries for research conducted during the 1987 summer term might be eliminated and that the NSF fellowship program might face a 12 percent cut given current budget pressures. Although his candid and timely report was appreciated, we certainly hope that any final changes will involve full consultation with our community. Similarly, we hope that the discussion of trade-offs between the number of new awards at the National Institutes of Health and their funding levels would follow the same kind of consultation.

As an analytical community we are prepared to cooperate fully in the accumulation of data and open evaluation leading to the rendering of judgments. Information collected by organizations like the Association of American Universities, the Council on Governmental Relations, OMB, NSF, the Defense Department, and the Department of Health and Human Services should be discussed around a common table where the issue is how to deal with the opportunities and problems of this partnership. Systematic and open review will be followed by appropriate change. At stake is the industrial competitiveness of the nation, which is based on and grew out of the vitality of our educational and scientific enterprise.

Four decades of fruitful sponsorship and execution of quality research programs on university campuses have not occurred by happenstance. Budgetary pressures and uncertainties have been known before and coped with; occasional management and audit problems have led to new controls and generally more efficient expenditure of funds; solutions have come from a mutual spirit of cooperation, hard work, and good will.

We do not have less need for knowledge and innovation or the productivity gains they foster. We must reestablish serious consultation. If that requires congressional action to achieve, then perhaps that should be explored. Steadiness is needed.—CORNELIUS J. PINGS, Provost, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90084-4019