Funding for biotechnology seen necessary to outgrow Japanese

By L. S. Wiener

"At the present time, the United States government is committing an absolutely disastrous mistake in the way it is allowing an erosion to take place in the funding for (biotechnology) research," said Dr. Ronald E. Cape, chairman of Cetus Corporation, in a talk on biotechnology sponsored by the Edgerton Lecture Series.

Cape discussed both the lack of federal funding for biotechnology research and the resulting increase in Japanese competition to American industry. "They did in 1950 what we are attempting to do. They did it in 5 years, they did it in 5 years." He said, "We are in a position that is more challenging than the opportunity the American industry had in the early sixties," he said.

Research is suffering at the university level, while industry is doing well. Cape said, "This is in shortage of money to do what the companies want to do," but the basic research financed by the National Institute of Health is "lucky to be holding its own."

Cape said he is amazed by the lack of research grants for biotechnology is occurring at a time when there have been many important newly discovered research areas. The reason, he said, is that "we placed in a position that is more challenging than the opportunity the American industry had in the early sixties," he said.

The problem of funding at universities is increasing the flow of top academic figures into industry, according to Cape. "It's like eating our own umbilical cord," he said, referring to industry's dependence on the universities to train potential employees.

Professors are increasingly tempted to move to industry, he noted, especially when the lack of university funding creates the very lucrative financial situation in industry. Genentech stock soared from $35 to $88 per share in one year — one example of the current rage.

Cape listed America's "long and short suits" in a race against Japanese technology. One long suit is our love for gambling, he said. "The hundreds of billions of dollars invested comes out of the pockets of people who want to shoot dice."

Our short suit is our impatience, he said. "The field will take a long, long, long, long time to pay off," Cape explained. The American tradition is to place a lot of pressure on its universities to show a profit. "They say genetic engineering is a terrific way to make a small fortune — providing you start with a large fortune," he said.

Cape said that the use of university funding is combined with government policy to encourage Japanese technology. "They did it to us in semiconductors, they did it to us in steel, they did it to us in medicine, they did it to us in the basic research financed by the United States, a program that is excessively one-sided, Cape said. He would like to see a government policy created to offset this technology drain. Cape and others have run into difficulties in appealing to Washington for protective policies. Although Reagan touted the importance of high technology in his State of the Union Address, the president slashed research budgets one week later.

Cape said at a recent meeting of the Industrial Biotechnology Association, Cape said he was told by the representative of George Keyworth, presidential science advisor that "the science advisor to the president is not there in any way to communicate to any of the opinions of the scientific community to the president — [rather] he is there to tell us what the president thinks about science."

Cape was a member of a task force created six months ago to determine the problems and possible solutions to many biotechnology policy issues, but Keyworth never met the report, Cape said.

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Two students victims of Tech Square muggings

By Amy S. Gorin

Two MIT students were robbed this weekend near Technology Square, according to James Oliver, chief of Campus Police.

Jan-Klop Cape '83 was walking past a housing project bordered by Harvard, Portland and Mass Streets Saturday evening on his way to deposit a paycheck when he was robbed, according to the Campus Police report.

The second robbery took place Sunday night, on Broadway near Hampshire Avenue, Oliver said. A female student was approached from behind by two males, one of whom brandished a pistol and demanded her purse, he said.

She gave the robbers her purse, he said, and the suspects ran toward a nearby housing project.

Cape described his assailants as two black males of medium height and weight, one clean-shaven and the other wearing a beard and mustache. They stepped out of a car, accosted him, and demanded his money, he said.

When Cape raised his hands and explained that he had no money, the men searched him, he said, but found only an empty wallet and the paycheck, a deposit slip, and bank card.

The assailants instructed Cape to enter the back of his car, he said. They then ordered him to lie down on the seat, drove to his bunk, and forced him to withdraw $350, Cape said.

The men took his money and the paycheck and drove toward Lexington, according to the Campus Police report.

One of the men claimed to have a shotgun and said he would "blow my head apart," according to Cape. The other said he had a pistol, but neither weapon was visible.

The suspects drove a late model, yellowish-white, American-made two-door sedan — possibly an Oldsmobile — with paper license plates 729-HSA, Cape said.

Oliver said Campus Police will distribute a bulletin later this week warning students to avoid certain areas around campus. The areas near Technology Square and Main Street are not as safe as others, Oliver said.

Although Reagen touted the importance of high technology in his State of the Union Address, the president slashed research budgets one week later.

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