

Preface to the Series

The extraordinary conditions in space, especially microgravity, are utilized today not only for research in physical and materials sciences—they especially provide a unique tool for research in various areas of life sciences. The major goal of this research is to uncover the role of gravity with regard to the origin, evolution, and future of life, and to the development and orientation of organisms from single cells and protists up to humans. This research only became possible with the advent of manned spaceflight some 50 years ago. With the first experiment having been conducted onboard Apollo 16, the German Space Life Sciences Program celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2012—a fitting occasion for Springer and the DLR (German Aerospace Center) to take stock of the space life sciences achievements made so far.

The DLR is the Federal Republic of Germany's National Aeronautics and Space Research Center. Its extensive research and development activities in aeronautics, space, energy, transport, and security are integrated into national and international cooperative ventures. In addition to its own research, as Germany's space agency the DLR has been charged by the federal government with the task of planning and implementing the German space program. Within the current space program, approved by the German government in November 2010, the overall goal for the life sciences section is to gain scientific knowledge and to reveal new application potentials by means of research under space conditions, especially by utilizing the microgravity environment of the International Space Station ISS.

With regard to the program's implementation, the DLR Space Administration provides the infrastructure and flight opportunities required, contracts the German space industry for the development of innovative research facilities, and provides the necessary research funding for the scientific teams at universities and other research institutes. While so-called small flight opportunities like the drop tower in Bremen, sounding rockets, and parabolic airplane flights are made available within the national program, research on the International Space Station ISS is implemented in the framework of Germany's participation in the ESA Microgravity Program or through bilateral cooperations with other space agencies. Free flyers

such as BION or FOTON satellites are used in cooperation with Russia. The recently started utilization of Chinese spacecrafts like Shenzhou has further expanded Germany's spectrum of flight opportunities, and discussions about future cooperation on the planned Chinese Space Station are currently under way.

From the very beginning in the 1970s, Germany has been the driving force for human spaceflight as well as for related research in the life and physical sciences in Europe. It was Germany that initiated the development of Spacelab as the European contribution to the American Space Shuttle System, complemented by setting up a sound national program. And today Germany continues to be the major European contributor to the ESA programs for the ISS and its scientific utilization.

For our series, we have approached leading scientists first and foremost in Germany, but also—since science and research are international and cooperative endeavors—in other countries to provide us with their views and their summaries of the accomplishments in the various fields of space life sciences research. By presenting the current SpringerBriefs on neuromuscular physiology, we start the series with an area that is currently attracting much attention—due in no small part to health problems such as muscle atrophy and osteoporosis in our modern aging society. Overall, it is interesting to note that the psycho-physiological changes that astronauts experience during their spaceflights closely resemble those of aging people on Earth but progress at a much faster rate. Circulatory and vestibular disorders set in immediately, muscles and bones degenerate within weeks or months, and even the immune system is impaired. Thus, the aging process as well as certain diseases can be studied at an accelerated pace, yielding valuable insights for the benefit of people on Earth as well. Luckily for the astronauts: these problems slowly disappear after their return to Earth, so that their recovery processes can also be investigated, yielding additional valuable information.

Booklets on nutrition and metabolism, on the immune system, on vestibular and neuroscience, on the cardiovascular and respiratory system, and on psycho-physiological human performance will follow. This separation of human physiology and space medicine into the various research areas follows a classical division. It will certainly become evident, however, that space medicine research pursues a highly integrative approach, offering an example that should also be followed in terrestrial research. The series will eventually be rounded out by booklets on gravitational and radiation biology.

We are convinced that this series, starting with its first booklet on neuromuscular physiology in space, will find interested readers and will contribute to the goal of convincing the general public that research in space, especially in the life sciences, has been and will continue to be of concrete benefit to people on Earth.

Bonn, Germany
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The International Space Station ISS; photo taken by an astronaut from the space shuttle Discovery, March 7, 2011 (NASA)



Extravehicular activity (EVA) of the German ESA astronaut Hans Schlegel working on the European Columbus lab of ISS, February 13, 2008 (NASA)

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