

Business & Money

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE AUGUST 15, 2004

Steady as they go

A biotech company's relocation has to be completed quickly — and very carefully

By Ross Kerber

GLOBE STAFF

BEDFORD — Scientists at NitroMed Inc. hope their experimental drugs will cure heart disease someday. But lately their focus has been on more mundane matters.

How fast could their freezer be moved?

It was a key question as the company prepared to relocate its headquarters last month, one of myriad biotechnology firms relocating in the region as they grow and move into spacious offices. Like so many other biotech companies, NitroMed keeps much of its key intellectual property — proprietary compounds and experimental tissues — in an 800-pound industrial-gray icebox that would have to be unplugged, gingerly moved, and trucked to the new location within six hours so that the precious material wouldn't melt like so much

ice cream.

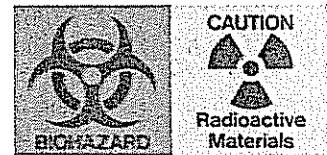
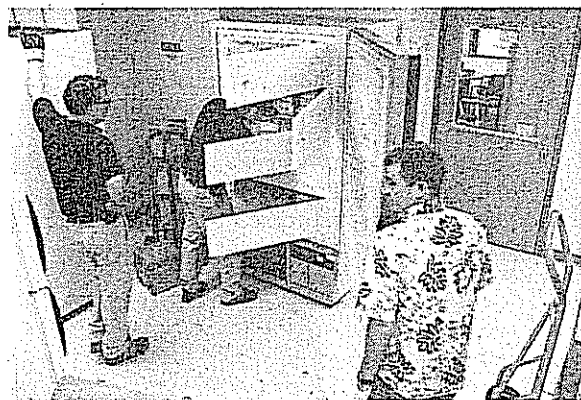
"If this truck breaks down, I'll be pretty nervous," said NitroMed senior vice president Gordon Letts on moving day, his arms crossed tensely.

All corporate relocations create headaches, but very few compare to what biotech companies go through as they move fragile centrifuges, radioactive material, and million-dollar experiments, often in midstream. Lori Stewart Coletti, vice president at Fox Relocation Management Corp. in Boston, which organized the NitroMed move, describes biotech relocations as "moving a shipment of very large, valuable Faberge eggs that happen to be filled with the cure for cancer."

Business is booming for Fox and other relocation companies as the Boston area be-

MOVING, Page E5

Bill Selig (right), senior project manager at NitroMed Inc., watches as dry ice is added to a freezer to keep the material inside super cold while it is being moved to a new location.



Biotech on the move

Company: NitroMed Inc.

Year: 2004

Moving from: Bedford

Moving to: Lexington

Employees: 45

Company: Agencourt Bioscience Corp.

Year: 2004

Moving from: Beverly

Moving to: Beverly

Employees: 80

Company: Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research

Year: 2004

Moving from: Cambridge and East Hanover, N.J.

Moving to: Cambridge

Employees: 275*

Company: AstraZeneca PLC

Year: 2000

Moved from: Cambridge

Moved to: Waltham

Employees: 80

Company: CereMedix Inc.

Year: 2004

Moved from: Worcester

Moved to: Maynard

Employees: 15

SOURCE: The companies

* Total number of employees transferred from current facilities; building accommodates 750.

Biotech firm's moving pains

► MOVING

Continued from Page E1

comes a hub for biotechnology. The Massachusetts Biotechnology Council estimates that one in five of its 400-plus members moves each year — higher than other sectors because the average biotechnology company tends to be younger and more restless. Some need extra room for more employees, some move to get better real-estate deals, and some seek better laboratory space, said Stephen Mulloney, the council's director of policy and public affairs.

For instance, CereMedix Inc., a developer of peptide-based drugs, has moved twice since 2002 seeking a better lease deal, winding up in Maynard. Each move required weeks of arrangements with contractors to move gallons of toxic chemicals.

"Moving," said Steven A. Kates, the company's vice president of research. "It's incredibly painful. Everybody dreads it."

Then there's managing the PhD-sized egos of researchers. One firm, ABC Moving Services Inc., tells its Teamsters not to talk moving details with scientists under any circumstances, lest they provoke arguments.

"We just tell them it's not your place to sit there and banter with these people — unless it's about a ballgame," said Sam Graves, president of the Somerville firm that specializes in relocating drug makers.

ABC also trains its workers to look out for discarded needles and has built special padded carts to

move glassware worth more than what's found in a china shop. Still, surprises abound. On one job, Graves opened a refrigerator and found a human leg, partially dissected and propped upright. "The guys with me thought it was funny," Graves said. "I was about to throw up."

At AstraZeneca PLC, it was the job of engineering manager Kevin Carmody to make sure a move from Cambridge to Waltham in 2000 didn't interrupt ongoing experiments.

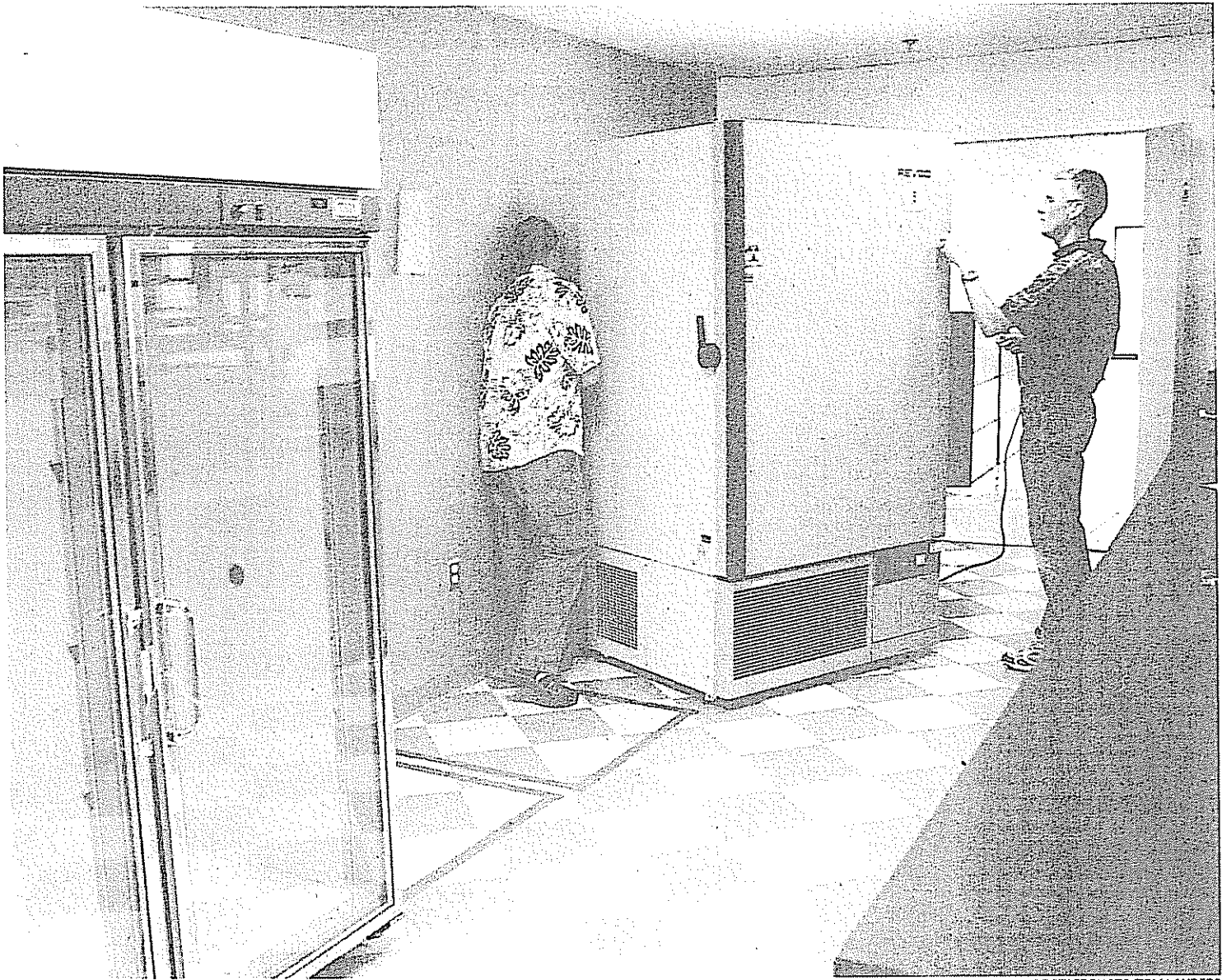
"Our haulers have insurance, but I don't know if there's enough money in the world to go back and re-do science that's taken five years to do," Carmody said.

Then there's the trick of maneuvering giant equipment into tight spaces, as Bernard Aebischer is learning as a facilities executive for the Novartis Institutes for Biomedical Research. He's shifting laboratories into a former candy factory in Cambridge, where crews had to cut a hole in one floor to lower a hulking 3,417-pound MRI machine to its spot in the basement.

The crew was to move the machine by elevator, but scientists ordered a new MRI that was too big to fit. Just before the move, Aebischer said he hoped it didn't topple on the way down, during what was meant to be "a very controlled drop."

NitroMed faced many of the same issues as it prepared to leave the office it had occupied since 1998, its third location since it started in Kendall Square in 1993.

All corporate relocations create headaches, but none compare to what biotechnology companies go through.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/TOM LANDERS

Bill Selig (left) and Jim Ellis reconnect a special freezer for moving fragile biological material during the NitroMed relocation. The Massachusetts Biotechnology Council estimates that one in five of its 400-plus members moves each year.

Letts and others had arranged to move five miles down Route 128 to a former Raytheon Co. building in Lexington, to make room for the 60 new employees the company plans to hire over the next year.

The extra staffing will help NitroMed launch and market its drug BiDil, a treatment for heart failure in African-Americans. The company expects to receive marketing approvals for it soon.

To move, the company undertook a logistical operation worthy of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, requiring weeks of planning and

costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. On July 16, specialists hired from firms including Toupin Rigging Co. of Dracut and mover Sterling Corp. of Billerica swarmed to take apart and rebuild computer networks, giant ovens, and centrifuges.

The stakes were highest for NitroMed's frozen intellectual property. Letts hovered anxiously at 9 a.m. as riggers scooped dry ice around the vials in the freezer. It is usually kept at minus-80 degrees Celsius, so cold that lab workers need special gloves to avoid frost-

bite. Ice crystals covered all the device's interior surfaces. "These are the ones where you can't stick your tongue to the door!" exclaimed one rigger.

The crew added big wads of bubble wrap to prevent the vials from rattling on the road, and eventually hauled them to the loading dock of the new building and up through a second-story window via forklift. Inside workers realized the electrical outlet for the freezer had the wrong voltage. Letts watched as electricians rewired the plug.

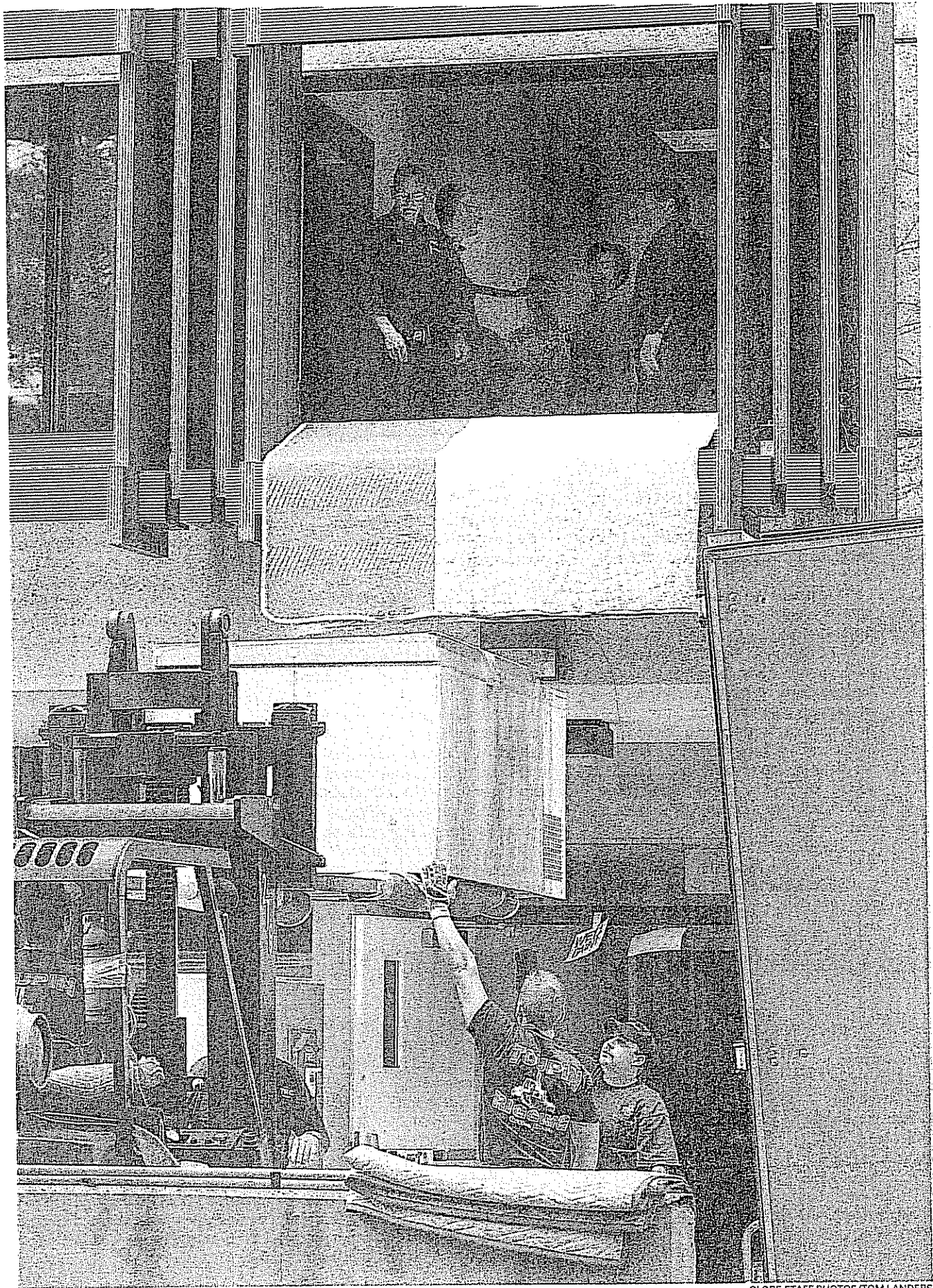
Others placed bets on how much cold air the freezer had lost in transition.

The crew finally got the freezer running at 1:20 p.m., about four hours after it was unplugged.

NitroMed research director Bill Selig checked the freezer's temperature display. "Minus 50," he said. "I can live with that. Gordon?"

A relaxed Letts said: "We can live with that."

Ross Kerber can be reached at kerber@globe.com.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/TOM LANDERS

At NitroMed Inc.'s new office, riggers hoist an 800-pound freezer containing biological materials that were being moved from the old office in Bedford to the Lexington building.