

“Hidden cuts” will damage UK medical research

THE Medical Research Council, like other UK research councils, has had to face “unprecedented” and immediate cuts in its current budget, as a result of the present British government’s policy of reducing public expenditure. But although these amounted, in the MRC’s case, to a £500,000 reduction in direct funding from the Department of Education and Science, “hidden cuts” would hit the MRC harder, said its secretary Professor J L Gowans at a press conference last week.

These were losses through having to meet pay increases from within a falling budget, through having to pay higher value added tax (the rate has been increased from 8% to 15%). And the tropical disease research programme of the MRC has been badly hit by the reduction in budget of the Ministry of Overseas Development, when it was absorbed into the Foreign Office to become the Overseas Development Administration. The total cuts amounted to some £2.1 million, or 3.5% of the MRC budget, said Professor Gowans.

Furthermore there was no firm information available to the MRC on which it might make plans for 1980-1 and beyond (though Professor Gowans expected that it would sustain further cuts). This caused great difficulties “as the shortest period for which we have to plan funding is three years, the duration of a research grant”.

“We need a stable budget both from the DES side, and from the universities.” The dual support system, whereby the universities themselves provided the basic facilities for a laboratory — building, stores, technicians and so on — was creaking.

Universities were also sustaining cuts, and in endeavouring to maintain teaching

were leaving more and more of the basics of laboratory funding to the research councils. The system was “creaking under the strain”.

“If in addition to the cuts we took this year, there are cuts of any magnitude in successive years, then damage will be done to medical research in Britain . . . There is a danger that high class new applications for research will go unfunded.”

However, despite the cuts the MRC managed to set up three new research units in the past year: a molecular haematology unit in Oxford, one for neuroendocrinology in Newcastle, and an environmental epidemiology unit in Southampton.

The council’s annual report for 1978-9, just published, pays attention to the jobs problem facing medical researchers. The MRC, which employs 991 clinical and non-clinical research scientists, “is constantly

aware of the need to keep under review its career structures in relation both to the interests of the individuals themselves and the advancement of science” says the report. The report offers no panacea.

●The Advisory Board to the Research Councils, which coordinates the direct funding of the councils through the Department of Education and Science, is consulting with the Treasury and the National Research Development Corporation to see if there can be any financial return to the Councils from patents arising from research council funded work. At present all benefits from these are retained by the NRDC, a large fraction of whose income comes from patents on the ‘cephalosporin’ antibiotics discovered under MRC funding. The talks, however, are progressing very slowly.

Robert Walgate

Commons debates animal experiments Bill

TWO separate bills to control the use of animals in scientific experiments are currently being considered by the UK Parliament: Lord Halsbury’s Animal Protection Bill (Nature, 16 August page 534) which successfully received its second reading in the House of Lords last month, and Mr Peter Fry’s Protection of Animals Bill which was read for a second time in the House of Commons last week.

Both bills are seeking to up-date existing legislation which is based on the 1876 Cruelty to Animals Act. “Whole new procedures have been developed, which I understand are totally outside the Act’s jurisdiction”, said Peter Fry during the opening speech to last week’s commons debate. For example, the transplant of tumours from one animal to another and the implanting and developing of antibodies within animals, he said, were procedures now in use which were not covered by the Act. New legislation was needed which would incorporate these and other procedures developed over the past 103 years.

Peter Fry’s Bill goes further than Lord Halsbury’s in several respects. In particular, it lays greater emphasis on the need to reduce the number of animals in experiments by controlling the type of research that is done. Like Lord Halsbury’s Bill, it recommends that alternatives to animal experiments should be used wherever they are available but it also emphasises the need to eliminate repetition of experiments.

One of the more controversial clauses of the Bill, however, states that “operative procedures” will only be allowed for “the advancement of biological science” in a way calculated to save or prolong human or animal life or relieve suffering. Is it possible to decide in advance what research will lead to such progress asked Tam Dalyell, who cited the discovery of enkephalin as an

example of research with animals of far reaching significance which could not have been anticipated. Mr Fry accepted the point, which had also been made to him by the Medical and Agricultural Research Councils, and suggested that the relevant clause be amended “to satisfy that kind of objection”.

Mr Fry’s Bill also differs substantially from Lord Halsbury’s over the granting of licences to experiment with animals. It recommends four different grades of licence covering all types of procedure. Grade 1 licences, explained Mr Fry, would be for the simplest procedures, such as giving injections. A Grade 2 licence would be the equivalent of the single licence now existing under the current legislation. It would allow surgical procedures under anaesthesia from which the animal is not allowed to recover. A Grade 3 licence would cover surgical operations where the animal is allowed to recover afterwards provided that it is suitably anaesthetised throughout the entire procedure. And a Grade 4 licence would be granted for “research in which pain is inevitable as part of the experiments”. Mr Fry expects that this latter category will raise the most objections from the antivivisectionists.

The Bill had a successful second reading and now goes forward to the committee stage. However, Mr Timothy Raison, Minister of State, Home Office, reminded MPs that a European Convention on animal experiments was currently being drawn up and that it would be wise to wait for that before passing legislation. The government, he said, could “not regard the Bill as it stood as an acceptable way of dealing with issues of a fundamental nature concerned with animal experimentation”. Nevertheless, it would not stifle the debate by opposing the Bill at this stage.

Judy Redfearn

Hubert Curien to head ESF in 1981

PROFESSOR Hubert Curien, 55-year-old President of the French Centre National d’Etudes Spatiale, is to succeed Lord Flowers as President of the European Science Foundation in 1981. Flowers, now Rector of the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London, was founder-President of the ESF and will have served two three-year terms when Curien takes over.

Professor Curien has played a prominent role in science politics since 1966, when he became scientific director of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the body which funds much of France’s basic research. “A laboratory is not a laboratory in France without some CNRS staff” says Curien. In 1969 he became its Director-General. In 1973 he was délégué general to the Délégation Générale à la Recherche Scientifique et Technique, and since 1976 he has been President of the CNES. □