

UK research councils

Bolt hits medical research

THE directors of the research units of the British Medical Council (MRC) have been abruptly informed that their budgets for the financial year beginning in just ten days on 1 April will be much tighter than anticipated. Several directors describe themselves as "shell-shocked" by the news, given to them at a meeting last week with the council's secretary, Sir James Gowans. The amount available for capital equipment such as instruments will be cut drastically to around £1 million, and operating budgets will be cut by approximately 20 per cent. Salaries will not be affected, nor will the number of project grants to universities, but posts may be left vacant to make savings.

Substantial cuts in MRC's budget had been expected in the financial year 1985-86, to allow for the "restructuring" of the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), both of which are planning staff reductions that will entail redundancy payments. This year's cuts, however, are apparently unrelated, and reflect the council's decision to spare research in the universities and even to compensate them for cuts to their recurrent grant paid through the University Grants Committee. The total budget for MRC is to be £117.2 million, a cut in real terms from last year's budget of £113.2 million.

MRC unit directors last week said that the 16 per cent cash cut to their recurrent "consumables" grant, which will save some £3 million, does not tell the whole story. Unlike previous years, there will be no automatic allowances for inflation, so the cut in real terms is about 20 per cent. Furthermore, the costs of laboratory sup-

plies are running well ahead of the inflation rate, as are fixed costs such as property taxes. Directors complain that they are committed to meet the cost of orders already placed. The steep drop in the level of the capital equipment grant, from £5.8 million in 1982-83 to £1 million next year, means that equipment purchases will be restricted to a few large items and those necessary for safety. MRC told directors last week that an extra allowance for capital equipment may be paid in the autumn.

It is not yet known how the individual MRC units will be affected. At last week's meeting, Sir James said that some units will be spared any recurrent grant cuts whatsoever, while others may be cut by more than 20 per cent. Units that have new programmes or unusual fixed costs — such as the Clinical Research Centre — will probably fare better than others. The council has had to meet the costs of establishing four new units, and their programmes are considered inviolate. And it has, like others, been hit hard by the obligation imposed on it to increase its contributions to employees' pension funds, costing £600,000 next year. MRC also lost about £500,000 as a consequence of a round-off exercise in the allocation of funds between research councils.

SERC will be making its financial allocations next week. Although the council will in 1985-86 be losing funds to support restructuring in AFRC and NERC, an official denies that SERC plans to make drastic cuts along the lines of those at MRC. SERC's budget increased this year by 10 per cent, to £278.8 million.

Tim Beardsley & Stephen Budiansky

Laboratory animals

Primate supply shrinks

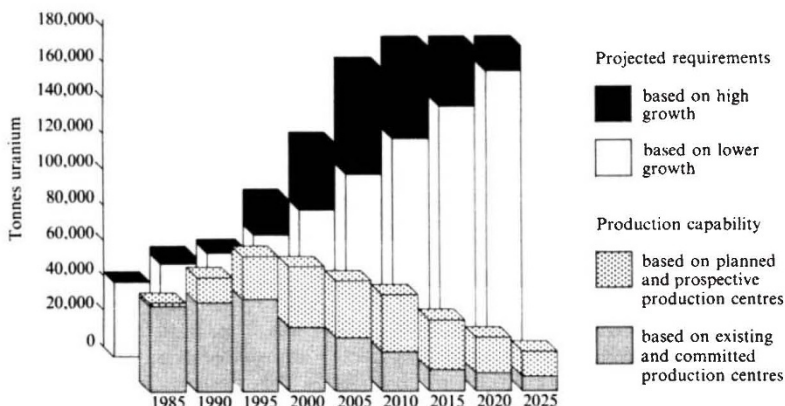
THE increasing difficulty of importing research primates is forcing European countries to establish breeding colonies of commonly used species. Malaysia last month became the latest of a series of countries to ban the export of primates for research, citing as its principal reason the discovery that monkeys exported to the United States were being used for biochemical and nuclear weapons research. There were also worries over the size of the remaining populations in the wild.

Military research accounts for about 15 per cent of the 20,000 primates used each year in the United States and about 12 per cent of the 3,000 used in Britain: the great majority are used for testing vaccines. But 12 countries have so far acted to prevent the export of their primates, for various reasons, and if Indonesia and the Philippines were to follow suit, prices would rise drastically.

Attempts to establish breeding colonies in the countries of use have not often been economically viable, producing (for example) rhesus monkeys at a cost of around £1,000 — two to three times the cost of an animal caught in the wild. But the governments of West Germany and Switzerland have been persuaded of the need to establish national breeding colonies for primates, and in Britain the Medical Research Council is encouraging a switch from Old World to New World monkeys, which it breeds itself.

Malaysia, which exported between 2,000 and 3,000 macaques a year, was not a major supplier and its ban is not expected to lead to acute shortages. But the decision by India to ban the export of rhesus monkeys in 1978 led to a switch towards the use of macaques, and future political moves could lead to further changes in the species used. While the wild populations of macaques in Indonesia and the Philippines are not yet under serious threat, some in the primate business are realizing that the supply will not last for ever.

Mr Keith Hobbs of Intersimian Ltd is one such. Hobbs says he left the Medical Research Council in frustration that the council would not heed his advice to establish a breeding colony to meet Britain's primate needs. His company, through an organization called SICON-BREC, is now building up a breeding colony of macaques in the Philippines. Hobbs stresses that the high rates of loss in transport that were common in the past have now been much improved. His aim is to build up a breeding colony of around 1,000 females — which would go a long way towards meeting Britain's needs. His price for a fully conditioned *Macaca fascicularis*: just £200. **Tim Beardsley**

Oil crisis . . . uranium crisis?

If worldwide production of uranium continues at its projected levels it could severely restrict future nuclear programmes, despite the fact that stockpiles are growing. This is the conclusion of a report released recently by the Nuclear Energy Agency of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (*Uranium: Resources, Production and Demand*). Stockpiles should hold until the end of the 1980s, but then demand will far outstrip production unless new uranium production programmes are started. The period since 1980 has seen a fall in production by the United States and increased production from Australia, France, Brazil, South Africa and Namibia. □