

A foray into red tape

Tokyo

MORE than a hundred scientists from around the world have just won grants under the Human Frontier Science Program (see below), and for all but one of these the hard part is over and all that remains is to spend the money. The lone exception? A Japanese researcher who faces a still unknown number of hurdles before he can put his award to work.

Kenji Kawano of the neuroscience section of the Electrotechnical Laboratory (ETL) in Tsukuba, who will study the neural mechanisms of vision in collaboration with researchers in the Netherlands and the United States, has the dubious privilege of being the first person from a Japanese national laboratory to get a Frontier grant. As such, he will have to blaze a trail through bureaucratic red tape to get his award. Kawano's progress will be watched closely by hundreds of his colleagues in Japan's national laboratories who have hesitated to apply for Frontier grants because of the bureaucratic problems they face if they win an award (see *Nature* 349, 185; 1991).

The problem confronting Kawano is that at present there is no mechanism for his Frontier grant to enter the accounting system for his institute. Japan's national laboratories, which include all of the country's government-funded research institutes except university-related institutes affiliated to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, are all fed from the same general pool of funds. If Kawano's grant is put into this pool, two things will happen. First, the grant will lose all identity and no longer belong to Kawano. And second, because of the rigid ceiling placed on the general account by the Ministry of Finance, funds would have to be displaced and eliminated from elsewhere in the account to make room.

That a Japanese researcher is subject to this Catch-22 is particularly ironic because it is Japan that started the Strasbourg-based Human Frontier Program and Japan still contributes the lion's share of the programme's funds — and these contributions come out of the same general account into which Kawano's award would be funnelled back.

Officials at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), to which ETL is



affiliated, think they have a solution. They have told Kawano to accept the grant into his own personal bank account. This approach became practical only late last year after the Ministry of Finance introduced special regulations to exempt Frontier grants from personal income tax, as a way to deal with similar bureaucratic problems facing university researchers who won the coveted awards (see *Nature* 347, 703; 1990).

Under a new set of special regulations just drafted by MITI, Kawano will then be able to buy equipment and supplies with his grant and bring them into his institute — after gaining the official approval of ETL's director by filling in a new set of forms. (Resear-

chers were not previously allowed to bring such 'personal' items into the laboratory.) When Kawano no longer has a use for the equipment, he can 'donate' it to ETL by filling in yet another set of forms.

Kawano says he is reasonably happy with this proposal but is apprehensive about how it is all going to work. One concern is that he needs someone to feed the monkeys for his experiments on the neural mechanisms of eye movement. But under MITI's proposal he cannot employ a part-time assistant with his Frontier grant because an assistant does not qualify as 'equipment' or 'supplies'. However, Masayoshi Hamada of MITI's Agency of Industrial Science and Technology says that Kawano can get around this problem by employing a student under an existing system for inviting 'visiting scientists' to ETL. All Kawano has to do is claim that the monkey feeder is a 'capable researcher' who deserves to be invited into the institute.

MITI officials are clearly on Kawano's side and will do everything possible to smooth his journey through the unknown bureaucratic jungle that awaits him. And in the end, he may end up better off than researchers who receive equal-sized grants from other sources.

Because the money will be deposited in his own personal bank account under his own management, Kawano will not have to pay ETL any overhead from his grant. Normally, researchers at ETL and other national laboratories have about ten per cent automatically lopped off their grants to cover such things as gas and electricity bills and administrative costs.

Kawano should also be able to earn several thousand dollars in interest on his grant while it sits in the bank. MITI officials say it is entirely up to him what he does with the extra money. After all, with his extra duties as trail-blazer and guinea pig, he will have earned it.

David Swinbanks

US leads race for Human Frontier grants

Tokyo

JAPAN pays most of the bill, but it is US researchers who come off best in the allocation of grants for international research on the brain and molecular biology announced last week by the Human Frontier Science Program Organization (HFPSO) in Strasbourg.

US scientists lead 15 out of the 32 successful international research teams, which will get grants ranging in value from about \$500,000 to \$900,000 for three years. And 46 out of the 139 scientists in the teams are from the United States, far more than from any of the other participating countries.

The dominance of the United States shows the growing interest of US scientists in the Japanese-inspired programme. Eighty out of the 239 principal applicants for grants were from the

United States, more than twice the number from any other nation.

HFPSO was set up under Japan's initiative by the Western summit nations (Canada, France, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany) and the European Communities in 1989. Switzerland also recently became a member. But Japan still provides more than 75% of the annual budget of about \$26 million for the programme.

The United States, on the other hand, has made no solid commitment to contribute money to the programme, although an official of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently wrote a letter to Sir James Gowans, the British secretary-general of HFPSO, promising 'in kind' support (see *Nature* 350, 97; 1991); this support would apparently add up to a few hundred thousand dollars a

year, spent in the form of salaries paid to Frontier fellowship winners who go to institutes affiliated with NIH. US government officials argue that the United States already does a tremendous amount to support international research on the brain and molecular biology through NIH and other US-funded grant programmes and so does not need to contribute much to Frontiers.

Japan fared reasonably well compared with the other non-US member countries. Japanese scientists lead three of the successful teams and there are 27 Japanese among the grant recipients. But the number of Japanese principal grant applicants was greatly reduced this year — to 29, compared with 55 last year. The fall-off in applicants is apparently due in part to fear of bureaucratic barriers that face successful applicants in Japan. **D.S.**