BRITAIN

Awkward decision

In an embarrassing and controversial decision, the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) last week agreed to "run down" its Demyelinating Diseases Unit in Newcastle. Chris Sherwell reports

ON THE face of it, the MRC's decision is in line with its overall policy regarding research units, namely that they last as long as the directors to which they are attached. A glance at the two most recent MRC annual reports, for example, shows a sizeable turnover, with two or three units a year appearing and more disbanding. The director of the Demyelinating Diseases Unit left over a year ago. So without a new director a run down and redeployment of the unit's 33 staff, if not closure altogether, was always on the cards.

The demonstration outside MRC headquarters on the day the decision was taken, however, suggested that this particular case was different. And so it is. Partly this is because a well organised and highly unionised staff at the unit was resisting the MRC,

an example of a phenomenon that the Council is only just beginning to accommodate. The more important reason is that the MRC has set such store by its multiple sclerosis (MS) research effort, of which the unit is a part. Not to be able to find a suitable director to take over the unit, which is the problem the MRC says it has faced, has made for many red faces. Some concerned lobbying from MS-related organisations has added to the controversy.

So too has the unit's stormy history, which finds its best expression in the circumstances surrounding the departure of E. L. Field as director in 1973. His controversial work is still debated, some say partly because the failed efforts to repeat his work have never been published. Henry Wisniewski became director in October 1974 but left in June last year for what were described as personal reasons. Work inspired by his animal model continues; this involves the development of a chronic relapsing form of experimental allergic encephalomyelitis which in important ways mimics MS.

Whether this would have remained a promising course of research, particularly without Wisniewski, is now a matter for speculation. But his departure brought more administrative problems, for he had been difficult to find. In an effort to keep the unit going the MRC cast round again for another director. One man who was invited declined, in spite of what the MRC calls "considerable material inducements". Several other candidates applied, including at least one from the unit itself. None fitted the bill. Advertisements which broadened the scope of the job to include dementias had not helped.

In May the MRC took a decision in principle to run the unit down. The Council met last week to consider an appeal from the staff, but the outcome was almost a foregone conclusion. The statement confirming that the decision would stand expressed great regret. A formal statement giving detailed reasons is expected this week. Whether this will try to explain how and why no director could be found to take the job is unclear. But in the meantime the MRC will probably be hoping that the unit it is now running down might one day start again. □

"LOST!", the *Sun's* front page headline boldly proclaimed. "Enough plutonium to make fourteen A-bombs. Finder please return to Tony Benn". It was one way—a popular daily's way—of reporting what was perhaps last week's non-story in Britain. Most other papers recognised it for what it was and gave it less prominence. But they still faced the problem of explaining that there was no problem.

The occasion was the publication by the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) and British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL) of data on nuclear materials accounting in Britain. The figures seemed to show that, since 1970, 96.8 kg of plutonium had gone "missing" from Windscale and 97.6 kg of highly enriched uranium from Dounreay. These are the sums of annual inventory differences—of arithmetical differences between the physical inventory and the book inventory of nuclear materials coming into, moving through and leaving any particular site or part of a site.

The annual inventory difference is known as MUF—material unaccounted for. And it is never zero. In these nuclear-fuel fearing days, the idea that plutonium or enriched uranium cannot be accounted for is, well, explosive. After all, if material always seems to be missing, how is

anyone to know when it really is missing? But it does not always seem to be missing; sometimes it seems to be growing. And for the same reasons

Material aid

Decanning Magnox fuel (BNFL)

BACKGROUND

that the UKAEA and BNFL are sure that no one has given them material illicitly, they are sure no one has taken it either. Those reasons are to be found in the security measures they adopt, of which MUF is simply not an integral part.

So what is MUF? Essentially it is a

recognition of the need to account for valuable materials—a need admittedly highlighted by the first reports three months ago that a shipload of uranium disappeared in 1968 between Antwerp and Genoa and by demands from such groups as Friends of the Earth for details of nuclear materials accounting in Britain and elsewhere. But accounting has always been there; and the techniques are apparently improving. What is new are the figures themselves.

In Britain the accounting balances are struck on a quarterly or monthly basis. Their minimal value as an aid against diversion might improve if, as is said to happen at some US plants, a balance is struck once a shift. But the MUF concept was not designed for this purpose.

The figures will move closer to zero only as built-in sources of error are reduced. These include inaccuracies in, for example, estimating the amounts of plutonium in irradiated fuel elements. Estimates of plutonium at other stages are also fraught with difficulty. No one is expecting the figures to reach zero.

MUF figures justify few fears or hopes. But if the accounting wasn't there, it would have to be invented; and most people would rather have the figures calculated.