

UK provides 'step increase' in funding for its science base

[LONDON] Britain's Labour government made good on pre-election signals this week when it announced that, egged on by the Wellcome Trust, it has agreed to inject an extra £700 million (US\$1.14 billion) into the country's science base over the next three years.

The decision, which will mean an increase of 7.3 per cent in research funding through the six UK research councils in the financial year that starts next April, has emerged from the comprehensive spending review launched by the government when it came to power last summer.

Extra government funding is being complemented by a further £400 million from the Wellcome Trust over the same period, making a total of £1.1 billion of new money. Of this, £600 million — shared jointly by the government and the trust — will go to the construction and refurbishment of university laboratories, a priority identified last year by the Dearing report on higher education (see *Nature* 388, 413; 1997).

In addition, the government is to make an extra £400 million available to the research councils to meet the current and capital costs of new project funding in priority areas "like life sciences". And Wellcome is to provide £100 million towards the cost of a new synchrotron source (see right).

According to the Department of Trade and Industry, which is responsible for the Office of Science and Technology (OST) and for the budget of the research councils, the result will be a 23.8 per cent cash increase over its 'baseline' provisions for science in 1998–99. That will mean a total of £1.67 billion by the financial year 2001–02 (in real terms, the increase will be 14.8 per cent).

"This is a step change for British science and engineering that will transform the funding of the science base after many years of neglect, and set us on a strong course for investment in the future," says Margaret Beckett, President of the Board of Trade, and the cabinet minister responsible for science.

Much of the new money will be to develop what John Cadogan, the director-general of the research councils — and a key figure in putting the science community's request for higher funding to the government — calls 'post-genome science', a broad category that covers all aspects of the exploitation of data emerging from human and other genome sequencing efforts.

Cadogan has argued strongly that, as this is a field in which Britain already has a strong competitive advantage, the future health of its economy depends on its success in finding

profitable applications for gene sequencing data, in particular for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease. The same argument has been put by much of the UK pharmaceutical and biotechnology industry.

Not surprisingly, the government's endorsement of this strategy has been warmly welcomed in the biomedical research community. "It is very exciting for us," says George Radda, secretary of the Medical Research Council.

Both Cadogan and Mike Dexter, the new director of the Wellcome Trust, emphasize that the task of understanding and exploiting genomic data will involve a wide range of research disciplines, from computer technology to fundamental physics. "This is a unique opportunity [for Britain] on the threshold of the next millennium," says Dexter.

There was a universal welcome on Monday for the new funding. "This has been a good day for British science," said John Mulvey, secretary of the pressure group Save British Science, which has long pushed for increases of this order of magnitude. "We are saying 'well done' to the OST, while the actions of Wellcome have been magnificent in ensuring the repair of university equipment."

Any overall assessment of the impact of the spending review will depend on the allocations to universities, which had not been announced as *Nature* went to press. But the indications were that, although the universities might be required to seek higher overhead repayments from research councils to cover their costs, threats to the 'dual support' system have not materialized (see *Nature* 393, 607; 1998).

David Dickson

Wellcome secures new synchrotron source

[LONDON] Christmas has come early this year to the 3,000 British users of synchrotron radiation with the announcement that the Wellcome Trust is to provide £100 million (US\$163 million) towards the cost of a new synchrotron facility.

The figure represents well over half of the anticipated construction costs of Diamond, the 3-GeV X-ray synchrotron machine planned as a successor to the world's first dedicated X-ray source, the 2-GeV Synchrotron Radiation Source at the Daresbury Laboratory in Cheshire.

Britain's research councils are expected to agree shortly to put up the remaining sum. They had been baulking at the prospect of having to finance the total construction cost and had been frantically seeking other possible sources of funding — including even resorting to bank loans.

The Wellcome announcement came as part of a broad £1.1 billion package of additional support for science announced on Monday (13



Dexter: an 'essential' tool.

July) by Margaret Beckett, the cabinet minister responsible for science (see above).

The trust's interest in contributing towards the cost of the facility had been known since last November, when it announced that it would give £10 million towards the project (see *Nature* 389, 318; 1997). The move was seen as a bid to catalyse decision-making in government circles.

It appears to have succeeded. Monday's unexpected announcement that Wellcome had decided to increase its contribution by an order of magnitude has been met with surprise and delight in the synchrotron research community, whose members range from

structural biologists to materials scientists.

"I am enormously pleased," says Guy Dodson, professor of chemistry at the University of York. "It is a remarkable commitment which means that the next generation of biologists and physicists can now be certain of having a level playing field in comparison with facilities available in the United States and elsewhere."

Mike Dexter, the new director of the Wellcome Trust, points out that the ability of synchrotron radiation to resolve the structure of small molecules has made it an essential tool for structural biologists.

This is a field in which Britain has many top-level researchers, including John Walker, last year's Nobel prize winner for chemistry (see *Nature* 389, 771; 1997). "We are determined to see that we keep these scientists in the United Kingdom, and ensure that they have the resources necessary to continue competing with the best in the world," says Dexter.

D.D.