Cancer research in France

Forces for change needed

CANCER research in France is a mess of conflicting interests and isolated groups, dominated by molecular biology and with almost no interest paid to clinical research and epidemiology — this is the picture that seems to emerge from a series of colloquia just completed in France on the research and treatment of cancer.

What's to be done? After a great deal of noise, now there is silence. The President of France, M. Mitterrand, and the health minister M. Jack Ralite are to appear on television to discuss the issues. But the real action is occurring behind the scenes, in the Groupe de Réflexion sur le Cancer.

Ralite established both this body and the national colloquia (the Concertation sur le Cancer) that followed, on the advice of Dr Jean-Claude Salomon, a well-known cancer immunologist whose views are anti-reductionist, pro-patient and socialist. Salomon hoped to use the colloquia to mobilize forces for change; and now he and his Groupe de Réflexion are about to assess the results and prepare political recommendations for the minister.

Naturally enough, Salomon will say little at this stage — he would not want to alert the forces he challenges. Ranged "against" him, suspicious of reform, are the two big private cancer research institutions, the ADRC at Villejuif and the Ligue Nationale, which between them spend more on cancer research than all public bodies put together, but fail to coordinate their research policies (attempts to harmonize them were recently abandoned). There are also the specialist cancer treatment centres, the public hospitals and the private clinics (mostly owned by banks) which compete among themselves for patients.

Of the 20 cancer centres, 10 are dominated by radiotherapists, who — Salomon has said in a less guarded moment — are too powerful in France. Private clinics are also mostly devoted to radiotherapy and Salomon believes that France uses radiotherapy more than any other country.

"Why do cancer patients die?" Salomon asks. Generally not directly of the tumour, he answers, but from secondary infection or endocrine disorders. "Cancer is a disease; the tumour a part of it". Such concepts will no doubt be influencing the recommendations of Salomon's Groupe de Réflexion in the next few weeks.

The national medical research council, INSERM, and the basic research council, CNRS, are not equipped to support such interdisciplinary and integrated research, Salomon believes; instead there should be a national institution to coordinate health and research policy in relation to cancer.

Robert Walgate

French Académie

New blood, third class

FRANCE'S Académie des Sciences, the close equivalent of the British Royal Society (both were founded in the mid-seventeenth century and have similar constitutions), is to be given a fresh breath of life — by one of the liveliest 75-year-olds in France.

Professor Jean Bernard, a renowned haematologist from the Hôpital St Louis in Paris, has been elected president of the Académie, and he promises to "appeal to the youngest researchers".

Already working at 8 a.m. last Saturday morning, he said on the telephone that the Académie's greatest problem was its ageing membership. "A brilliant mathematician elected at the age of 35 will be in the Académie for 50 years", he said.

His solution is to increase the number of "corresponding members", a kind of third class of membership which does not confer voting rights but does allow participation in the activities of the Académie — which increasingly involve advice to government. This would rejuvenate the Académie without committing it to vast and irreversible expansion, Bernard believes.

Although his appointment was approved by the minister for research and technology, M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Bernard insists that the Académie is "entirely independent".

In his inaugural speech recently, Bernard

spoke of three distinct historical periods of relations between the government and the Académie. "First, a period of frequent consultations, from the hydraulic engineering for the gardens of Versailles to poison gas in 1915; a desert, silence for sixty years, from the poison gas to Three Mile Island [when the government again asked for advice]; then the present period, when our advice is wanted again."

Asked if he was in sympathy with Chevènement's approach to science and technology in France, Bernard replied last week that there were two dangers facing science: that it should be too concerned with the fundamental and ignore applications; and vice versa. "The Académie is largely for basic science", said Bernard. But it will not ignore applications and recently set up CADAS, the committee for the applications of science, under the chairmanship of space scientist M. Hubert Curien.

The Académie also wishes to play a role in one of M. Chevènement's favourite projects: a great French encyclopaedia of science and technology, in the tradition of Diderot, but using modern information techniques. Bernard would also like to set up interdisciplinary studies with the other partners in the Institut de France.

Robert Walgate

UK science education

Royal Society call for new exams

MODEST but practicable proposals for the reform of science education in British schools were put forward earlier this week by a committee of the Royal Society under Sir Harry Pitt, previously vice-chancellor at the University of Reading. Among other things, the committee recommends that science should occupy 20 per cent of the secondary school curriculum (with mathematics extra) and that courses and examinations should be modified so that students do not have to abandon particular science subjects. On the vexed question of specialization in the sixth form, the committee advocates science courses with roughly half the content of the advanced-level courses now followed by some 20 per cent of school-leavers.

The committee's report, "Science Education 11-18", is in part based on a specially commissioned survey of the practice of science education in state-supported secondary schools. The past opinion of Royal Society committees that schools should give special attention to the needs of students with an early and exclusive interest in science subjects is conspicuous by its absence.

The committee also makes a series of intelligent asides on questions such as the place of history in science courses and the

need that science and technology should be more conspicuous in the history taught in secondary schools.

The case for the committee's demand for 20 per cent of the school curriculum, at least in the final two years of the usual five-year course, stems from its belief that all secondary students should learn something of the whole of science and that, in most British schools, teachers are better prepared to teach physics, chemistry and biology than some form of integrated science.

On examinations, a well-known British preoccupation, the committee asks for a reduction of the content of the syllabuses on which public examinations taken at 16 are based, together with an interlocking system of examinations intended for students of different ability, a development originally suggested two years ago in connection with mathematics so as to avoid the present circumstances in which the median performance tends to qualify only for the lowest or next-to-lowest grade. Almost nostalgically, the committee notes that its proposal that there should be examinations to be taken at 18 requiring only half as much preparation as for the existing advanced-level examinations, entails a return to a system abolished in England and Wales decades ago. [1]