

Medical Research Council

Government blamed for decay

FORCED to lay bare its plans for the next five years, the British Medical Research Council (MRC) has identified several areas of research into which it intends to pump money but is much less categorical about where the money will come from.

MRC's first "Corporate Plan", published last week, has been produced in response to a request by ministers and the Advisory Board for the Research Councils for each council to explain how it intends to cope with the decline in the overall funds for research that are forecast for the next five years. In a grudging introduction to its plan, MRC asks how it can plan for five years when its budget is the result of an annual bid with an uncertain outcome, made worse by late decisions.

In general terms, the plan states that MRC cannot simply opt out of some areas of medical research. So it will have to raise the threshold for providing funds in all areas of research. At the same time, there is a need for concentration of resources within certain areas in order for the research to be internationally competitive.

The one such area of research that is clearly identified in the plan is neurobiology. This comes as no surprise, since MRC has repeatedly stressed that British neurobiology is in a poor state but has failed to do much about it. "There is a need for a large centre where the development, interactions and molecular biology of nerve cells and their supporting com-

ponents can be studied... in order to retain in this country a number of our most gifted workers", says the report. Additionally it identifies an urgent need to establish at least one major new centre in Alzheimer's disease and a large new facility of parasitology, particularly since spending on tropical medicine in Britain "can only be described as derisory".

Other priorities include a new MRC unit to study disorders of movement and balance, an expansion of support for protein engineering and a need for strong centres for the clinically led study of infectious diseases.

The problem is how to support the new initiatives. MRC uses its plan to say that while remaining alert to ways of increasing its income from commercial resources — which accounted for less than £2 million of the £123.5 million income last year — the generation of income will not become a guiding purpose of its research programmes. Nor does the council intend to become a fund-raising organization.

Even without the need to finance new initiatives, the plan identifies the need for extra spending. First, the salaries that can be offered are already uncompetitive in some key areas of research. Second, there is a pressing need to increase the number of research studentships and training fellowships to avoid the loss to research of many gifted graduates. And, third, there is the severe problem of outdated equip-

ment in MRC research establishments.

To meet all these demands, MRC is to impose higher standards in judging whether to continue an existing research unit upon the departure of its director, and to encourage all directors not to replace staff who leave. It intends also to introduce compulsory retirement "on grounds of reduced efficiency" for its scientists and to be tougher in assessing the cost-effectiveness of research it supports.

Lacking any real solution to its financial problems, however, MRC uses its corporate plan repeatedly to attack government policy. Reduction of public expenditure is a legitimate aim, it implies, but "the cuts have been made too rapidly for any sensible accommodation... there has been little appreciation of the damage this is causing to the nation's research capability".

Peter Newmark

West German environment

Greens bite back in Hesse

Hamburg

HERR Joschka Fischer has begun to make his mark as the first member of the environmentalist Green party to hold office as a regional government minister. At the beginning of the month, Fischer made public his first set of regulations, intended to improve water quality of the rivers Main and Rhine, which will bear most directly on the operations of Farbwerke Hoechst, the largest chemical manufacturer in West Germany.

Fischer owes his post as a minister in the Hesse government to the failure of the Social Democrats (SPD) to retain their majority in the Hesse parliament. The Hesse Greens were at first divided over the proposal that they should form a coalition with the SPD, but eventually a "red-green" alliance was formed.

Far from being a stranger to politics, Fischer won acclaim during his two years in the federal parliament (Bundestag) as an eloquent speaker. He was required to retire from the Bundestag when the Greens decided that their representatives would be rotated every two years.

In fact the pollution limits so far decreed are likely to cause Hoechst very little trouble. Apparently relieved that the regulations are not more worrying, the company says that it will need no new equipment to keep its daily discharge of mercury below 1.125 kg and cadmium below 0.6 kg (a fourfold reduction in each case). The daily discharge of all acid is to be reduced from 150 to 10 tonnes. However, Fischer does not conceal his intention, in collaboration with Hoechst, that pollution should be further reduced when the new regulations expire in 1987.

Jürgen Neffe

British farm research

Downbeat plan for agriculture

THE British Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC), which has seen the British government wash its hands of responsibility for agricultural research in the past five years, has now produced a corporate plan for the years ahead which is reciprocally dismissive of what it can expect from government. The chief message is that, within a budget that will have shrunk by some 26 per cent (if inflation works out at an average of 5 per cent a year) between 1983 and 1991, the council will somehow manage to increase its spending on university research grants to more than £8 million a year.

The council goes further than its predecessors to acknowledge why the British government has been beastly towards AFRC by noting that the success of European agricultural research, which is manifested by the large surpluses of commodities accumulated under the Common Agricultural Policy, are a proof that merely increasing production is no longer a sufficient objective for research. But the plan says that while consideration such as

the nutritional value of the public diet are now of greater importance than in the past, it remains the case that the production of high-value crops at low cost is an important objective of research.

The plan also marks out, as a new direction for its research, the better integration of agriculture with environmental considerations, an issue raised two years ago by a report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology which was generally critical of farmers.

The corporate plan shows that most areas of AFRC research will decline in the years ahead, but that there will be a growth (to 14.2 per cent by value) of food research. It says that it hopes to raise funds from other than government sources to increase what it has available for research, but is plainly uncertain how to calculate what may be available given the government's intention to support a substantial part of the cost of British agricultural research by levies on those sections of the farming industry that can be made to pay for the service. □