Bernard Kilby worked in both the chemistry and pathology units at Cambridge and oversaw many of the human and animal tests. He says it was suggested that the units “do something useful” while they were waiting for a gas attack. The Cambridge unit was allocated lead and fluorine compounds, and tried to develop new toxic compounds based on those identified during the inter-war years. Kilby worked on making the fluorine analogue of mustard gas — widely used in the first world war.

When the Cambridge team discovered successful new substances, such as diisopropyl fluorophosphate (DFP), these were developed at the Ministry of Defence's Porton Down research centre. DFP went on to be manufactured on a large scale by the United States during the war. Gases were never used during the second world war, although once it was over, chemists realized that Germany had developed chemical agents much further than they had anticipated.

One of the chemists involved in the Cambridge experiments says he shudders to think what an ethics committee would say today about the research. But Ilett says they trusted the pathology lab's calculations on body weight. “It was war time. Everyone was taking risks. You were not offering yourself as sacrifice, but it took away the boredom of the war years in Cambridge”.

Natasha Loder

Cuts may force cancellation of Austrian research grants

Munich

Austria's new coalition government has slashed the annual budget of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), the country's main funding agency for basic research, by a quarter, forcing the agency to consider cancelling two of the six rounds of grants awards that it makes every year.

The cuts are part of a broad cost-cutting budget introduced by the government. But what has particularly upset researchers is the fact that the cuts to the science fund are significantly higher than those being imposed on other areas of public spending.

Many have reacted with dismay to this decision, which means that no money for funding new projects will be available until after the summer. “This is absolutely unacceptable,” says Gunther Kreil, head of the department of biochemistry at the Austrian Academy of Sciences' Institute for Molecular Biology (IMB) in Salzburg.

The IMB employs about 20 PhD students and postdoctoral researchers on FWF grants, part of the 1,300 supported in the whole of Austria in this way. Although existing jobs

and projects may not be threatened in the immediate future, Kreil foresees bleak prospects for the next wave of researchers.

“It will become immensely difficult, even for very gifted young scientists, to get grant money,” he says, expressing particular concern at the impact that the move could have in competitive areas such as molecular biology. “It is a shame that this comes at a time when there is an abundance of excellent research ideas.”

Arnold Schmidt, the FWF's president, has called the cuts “a sheer disaster” for all basic research in Austria. He says that he is particularly disappointed that pre-election promises to increase public spending on research significantly over the next few years have apparently been abandoned.

With a mere 1.6 per cent of the gross national product being spent on research, Austria has never been the land of plenty for scientists, although some recent initiatives — such as the creation of a new Genome Research Centre in Vienna (see *Nature* 401, 630; 1999) — have brightened the general picture.

Quirin Schiermeier