Germany revamps system to fund medical research

Munich. German research minister Matthias Wissmann last week announced a major restructuring of medical research funding that for the first time establishes independent external refereeing for projects in universities and their associated clinics.

tend to be small and isolated, shunning collaborative links with other small groups, either locally or nationally.

Wissmann wants to change this. The BMFT is allocating DM250 million over the next eight years to support six to eight interdisciplinary research centres. These centres will be composed of several research teams, usually local, that focus on defined collaborative projects. The projects undertaken by the centres will be assessed by a formal refereeing systems of international standards.

Most of the cost will at first be picked up at the federal level, but the BMFT will gradually reduce its share of financial support over the eight years. The clinics will have to make up the difference with funds from the *Länder*, thereby ensuring that the money is used for

A new plan for German health research

Wissmann hopes that his plan, called 'Health Research 2000', will eliminate inefficiencies within German biological research (see *Nature* 357, 182; 1992) and strengthen the weak links between basic medical and clinical research.

Some DM2.15 billion (US\$1.36 billion) has been set aside by the research ministry, the BMFT, to support the first three years of the plan. Around DM1.4 billion will be used to fund medical research in the large national research centres, such as the German Cancer Research Centre in Heidelberg, and DM750 million will be spent on individual projects in other research institutes or universities. The BMFT hopes that new methods for allocating money will encourage a restructuring of university research which, it believes, is in urgent need of reform.

Although university researchers can apply for BMFT project grants, universities receive their basic research money from their local (*Länder*) governments. This money is not usually distributed on a truly competitive basis, a process that is widely criticized.

Clinical research is carried out mostly at university clinics, which receive 80 per cent of their cash from medical insurance companies and the rest from the *Länder*. Although this 20 per cent is intended for teaching and research, much of it is used to make up deficits in general health-care budgets. Inefficiency in the clinics and the universities is compounded by the fact that research groups

its intended purpose.

Remaining funds will be allocated to individual projects, a third to public health research and two-thirds to clinical research. Joint applications will be shown preference, as well as projects that "strengthen cooperation between basic and applied [clinical] research".

Alison Abbott

Montagnier to assess French AIDS effort

Paris. Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in Paris has been appointed to lead a panel reviewing France's effort against AIDS. The breadth of Montagnier's assignment — to examine social and public health issues as well as current research — has prompted speculation that the government may appoint him to a new position of national AIDS coordinator.

"The government considers that more needs to be done", says Montagnier, whose preliminary report is due in August. Although he says that he intends to keep an open mind, Montagnier has criticized the government in the past for not supporting more research outside the mainstream and for not paying more attention to Africa. In January, he and Federico Mayor, director general of UNESCO, created the World Foundation for Research and Prevention of AIDS (see *Nature* 361, 102; 1993). **D.B.**

Whaling meeting expected to leave issue unresolved

Tokyo. Despite years of debate and scientific analysis, next week's meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) is unlikely to resolve the fate of commercial whaling.

Anti-whaling forces at the annual meeting in Kyoto do not have sufficient support for a French proposal to create a whale sanctuary in the southern ocean which would prevent the Japanese from resuming commercial whaling. Neither does Japan have the votes to achieve a resumption in commercial whaling, despite evidence from the IWC's scientific committee that there are sufficient numbers of minke whales.

In 1982, the IWC introduced a moratorium on commercial whaling on the basis of incomplete data on the size of the population and whether it was sufficient to sustain commercial activity without risk to the species. By 1991, the IWC scientific committee had developed a revised management procedure (RMP) to provide adequate safeguards and had estimated the population of Antarctic minke whale at 760,000, well above the number needed to resume commercial whaling (see *Nature* 357, 532; 1992). But the IWC has yet to decide whether to continue or end the moratorium, preferring to ask more questions of the scientific committee regarding the management procedure (see *Nature* 358, 99; 1992).

"My guess is the commissioners will be desperate for a reason to postpone a decision", says one scientist participating in the closed scientific committee meetings that have preceded next week's plenary session. "If they voted to lift the moratorium, they'd get lynched at home."

A proposal by France to create a whale sanctuary in the southern ocean below 40° S may provide grounds for delay. The Japanese are confident they can muster the necessary 25 per cent minority to block the French proposal if a vote is called. Instead, those against whaling are likely to push for further discussion of the proposal.

The Japanese are in no hurry to push for resumption of commercial whaling. "Even if the IWC permits us to resume, commercial whaling [in the Antarctic] has died", says Japan's IWC representative, Fukuzo Nagasaki. "It would take two or three years to develop a concrete plan."

Japan sees its fight to preserve commercial whaling as a test case for its exploitation of other commercially more important marine resources, for example the bluefin tuna in the Atlantic. A defeat in a situation where sustainable management of the resource seems possible could threaten other resources where there is greater cause for concern about depletion.

David Swinbanks