

# nature immunology

## Backward investment strategy?

The Medical Research Council (MRC) of Great Britain, established in 1913, supports basic and applied research relevant to medicine. Some of the most prominent discoveries and achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the discovery of DNA's double helix 50 years ago, have been funded by the MRC. Recently, however, the MRC has received a barrage of criticism from individual researchers and institutions. Many of these complaints were endorsed in a scathing report issued in March 2003 by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee ([www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)).

The report cites "poor financial management and poor planning" as the reason for the "large numbers of top quality grant proposals being turned down", reducing the success rate for the MRC's grant applications to "unacceptable levels". This funding crisis has been blamed on the MRC allocating too much money to large projects, such as the UK Biobank genetic database.

In the wake of this report comes the MRC's highly controversial plan, detailed in its Forward Investment Strategy (FIS) released on 4 April 2003, to downsize and relocate the National Institute of Medical Research (NIMR) from Mill Hill, London, to Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge. The NIMR, originally founded in 1918 and located at Mill Hill since 1950, is the MRC's largest institute. This highly respected research center is where influenza virus, type 1 interferon and interleukin 5 were discovered. Indeed, the MRC's own Quinquennial Review Committee Report of 2000 states that the Infections and Immunity Group at the NIMR "constitutes one of the MRC's few focal points of outstanding infections and immunity research" and is a "key national priority".

What, then, could be the rationale for closing the NIMR's present site? The FIS subcommittee feels that the future of medical research depends heavily on multidisciplinary interactions, and that the NIMR, located in greater London, is "too isolated from clinical and other academic units" to remain productive. In addition, future upkeep of the institute's present site is deemed too costly. Integration of the NIMR with a university and medical school site, in the eyes of the subcommittee, would foster a more multidisciplinary clinical environment that would be equally productive and give better value for money.

The validity of this rationale is questionable, however. It does not take into account the fact that the NIMR already fulfills the

MRC vision outlined in the FIS. Because of its close proximity to central London, the NIMR enjoys major collaborations with hospitals and universities in London, and has access to a patient population much larger and more appropriate for research than is available at Addenbrooke's. The Quinquennial review also stressed that the "added value of the Institute environment was clearly reflected in the number of high quality integrated programs involving interactions between different divisions and sharing of expertise and technologies". The review committee noted the paramount importance of preserving the integrity of the Institute, an idea the MRC seemed to embrace when it recently invested heavily in an expanded animal facility at Mill Hill. It thus seems counterintuitive to scale down and relocate an institute that already provides effective multidisciplinary interactions and has a proven success record.

The FIS of the MRC raises concerns about the general state of UK research funding. The seeming disregard for the Quinquennial Review, and the lack of extensive consultation with scientists at the NIMR or the MRC institute, suggest that pressures other than peer review are being brought to bear on British research, casting an ominous shadow on its continued excellence. That the MRC's proposal came in the wake of the Government select committee's damning report, and just a few months before the current CEO, Sir George Radda, steps down, should raise eyebrows. Also, an apparent conflict of interest exists, in that members of the MRC subcommittee that produced the FIS report will appraise NIMR science in its next Quinquennial review.

The FIS is currently posted on the MRC website for consultation. A final decision whether to close Mill Hill will be made by the MRC in July 2003. The many rumors that circulated after this document was leaked, and then made public, have already initiated a painful downturn at the NIMR. Even before the report was officially released, several NIMR investigators received job offers on the premise that the NIMR is closing, reflecting an atmosphere that makes it impossible to attract and retain staff. Closure would be a mistake for UK research in general and immunology in particular. Hopefully the MRC will pay heed to the scientists it is mandated to support. Swift action by the MRC is needed to ensure that the public continues to reap the benefits of its 80-year commitment to the NIMR.