

MRC to open new CJD research unit...

The MRC will spend £1.5 million (\$2.5 million) a year for the next five years on a new London research center to study Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (CJD) and other prion diseases. Although it will carry out basic research, such as the study of prion protein structure and disease pathogenesis, a top priority for the new center will be to develop tests for CJD and 'new variant' CJD (nvCJD) in human tissue samples. Such tests, it is hoped, will provide an early warning of any imminent large-scale health problem that some fear could still result from the BSE epidemic among cattle in the mid-1980s.

The UK government has spent £2.5 billion to slaughter about 30 million cattle and estimates that an additional £1 billion will be needed to dispose of more animals by the year 2000.

Thirty people have died so far from nvCJD and until recently, its diagnosis could only be confirmed postmortem from a brain biopsy. But researchers have discovered that the abnormal prion precursor can be detected in appendix and tonsil tissue removed during surgery from patients later found to suffer from CJD. Consequently, the new unit plans to carry out anonymous screening of tonsils stored at hospitals throughout the UK to estimate the extent of the disease's spread. If testing reveals cases of nvCJD, Britain's Chief Medical Officer, Sir Kenneth Calman, says it may be necessary to notify individuals.

The long incubation period of nvCJD makes it difficult to determine the potential size of the health problem. "If you had a test that you felt was sensitive all the way

through the incubation period, then an obvious step is to undertake some sort of anonymous screening," says Azra Ghani,



John Collinge

a statistician at the University of Oxford, but she warns that even large-scale screening will carry a high level of uncertainty if the test is unable to detect the early stages of an infection (*The Lancet* 352, 1353; 1998).

John Collinge, head of the neurogenetics department at the Imperial College School of Medicine at St. Mary's Hospital and a prion expert, has been appointed director of the new unit. Charles Weissmann, a molecular biologist at the University of Zurich, is scheduled to join the project in March of 1999, and the unit, which is intended to comprise 60 staff, may eventually move into its own facility separate from its initial base at St Mary's Hospital. Collinge believes that "inevitably this will be a unit which the government can turn to for answers to particular questions."

Whether the government will listen is another matter. Evidence that has emerged from the ongoing, and increasingly acrimonious, BSE inquiry suggests that the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries ignored the advice of scientists in the early 1990s (*Nature Med.* 4, 135; 1998) and neglected to inform Calman of the potential danger. Specific accusations are likely to be formulated in the second phase of the inquiry, scheduled to begin in February of 1999.

ALAN DOVE, NEW YORK

Vintage cars fund new Scripps institute

Funding for a new US\$85 million Institute for Childhood and Neglected Diseases is speeding ahead thanks to an extraordinary partnership between The Scripps Research Institute and *The Symbolic Motor Car Company*. The Wheels of Progress fundraising campaign has raised US\$53 million towards construction of a new institute, which is to begin this month on the Scripps campus in La Jolla, California.

John Moores, owner of the San Diego Padres baseball team, donated his entire collection of 23 vintage cars to the fundraising effort. Auction of his 1967 Ferrari 275 GTS/4 NART Spyder by Christie's raised US\$2.1 million for the center and

a second classic car auction raised more than US\$1.5 million. Uniquely, the institute will not only house laboratories for 25 research groups but will also contain a museum for vintage cars.

In collaboration with the San Diego Children's Hospital, the new research center will investigate the molecular basis of childhood diseases such as cystic fibrosis, Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and autism, and will study parasitic diseases such as malaria and schistosomiasis. "We are thrilled that people interested in [vintage] automobiles have adopted medical research as a cause," says Richard A. Lerner, president of Scripps.

ORLA SMITH, NEW YORK

...and recruit foreign research experts

Britain's MRC is to set aside £8 million (\$13.5 million) over the next four years to attract and fund high-level researchers from outside the UK. Funding will come from the extra £90 million that the MRC will receive over the next three years.

The International Appointments Initiative is being established to help both universities and the MRC research centers and units recruit prominent researchers from overseas. Shortly after the release of the new budget figures, for example, it was announced that the prominent spongiform encephalopathy researcher, Charles Weissmann, currently at the University of Zurich in Switzerland, is to join the staff of a new prion research unit.

In recent years, the MRC has attracted a number of prominent researchers to Britain, one of the first being the neuroscientist Robert Plomin, an expert in the genetic basis of cognitive function, who was appointed three years ago to a top research post at the MRC's Institute of Psychiatry in London. But once such an individual was appointed, they have then had to begin submitting their own grant applications.

The new Initiative is intended to avoid this process. Once an investigator has been identified as a potential recruit to Britain's biomedical research community, they will be able to negotiate a grant from the new fund as part of the recruitment process. "We want to be able to offer people a bit of a package up front," says a senior MRC official. And some of the extra money going to the MRC will go to expanding postgraduate training and postdoctoral career opportunities in priority areas.

Sir George Radda, chief executive of the MRC, describes the overall budget settlement, in which science received a greater a proportional increase than any other single element of public funding, as "a vote of confidence in the research community." He is particularly pleased with the government's decision to provide a firm budget commitment over three years, and not just one year as has been the government's practice in recent years. "This move recognizes that research is a long-term business, and will make forward planning for us very much easier," he told *Nature Medicine*.

DAVID DICKSON, LONDON



Sir George Radda