

New broom at the DHSS

EFFORTS to streamline the administration of medical research have been promised by the new chief scientist at the UK Department of Health and Social Security, Professor Arthur Buller.

The promise is likely to be widely welcomed by Britain's medical science community. There has been growing frustration in recent months at the burdens imposed on research by the implementation of Lord Rothschild's proposals for research council funding.

Professor Buller brings to the job a growing awareness that the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the DHSS must work closely together, and with mutual trust, if the new system is to be made to work. Only this, for example, will avoid the DHSS presenting the research council with requests—such as a “cure for schizophrenia”—that are impossible to meet at the present time.

A close liaison will also, Professor Buller feels, avoid a repetition of the situation that arose two years ago when the Government's economic problems led to hastily imposed cutbacks of department research budgets, and consequently a reduction of £900,000 in the money available to the MRC from the DHSS.

“It is impossible to maintain any type of meaningful relationship between the two bodies if this type of thing, which happens when administration gets quite separated from research, is liable to take place. From the MRC's point of view, last time was a near disaster.”

Professor Buller, whose appointment was announced last week, will take up his new position with responsibility for a £28m research budget from the beginning of January. He is keen to reduce the extra administration that the Rothschild proposals have involved, a desire he shares with the new secretary of the Medical Research Council, Professor James Gowans.

Unlike many scientists, however, he does not criticise the philosophy behind the proposals, under which about 25% of the MRC's £52m research budget is now allocated by the department to the research council on a “customer-contractor” basis.

According to Professor Buller, the problem lies in the way that this has been done. “In the past, too much of a meal has been made of being seen to implement Rothschild. An enormous exercise, which has been expensive and time-consuming for both scientists and administrators, has been mounted so that both sides could demonstrate that they were carrying out Rothschild's recommendations”, he says.

By cutting down on this type of activity, while concentrating on what remains necessary to maintain an effective partnership between the MRC and the DHSS, Professor Buller hopes to simplify the administrative system between the two bodies, without any loss of effectiveness. And it is a goal which, he claims, is already shared by the DHSS.

Professor Buller has been seconded to the department from the University of Bristol, at which he is professor of physiology and dean of the faculty of medicine. He shares a general reputation claimed by the university for pragmatism rather than politics in administrative affairs, although membership of the non-academic staff salaries committee has made him no stranger to the latter.

Buller gained further experience in the world of medical politics at the MRC itself, where he is at present chairman of the neurobiology and mental health board and a council member. The board's main concern in recent years can, he says, be succinctly summarised: “We have spent our time trying to live with Rothschild”.

One of Buller's aims likely to receive widespread support among scientists is his desire to return the initiative on research back to the research worker. The most important thing, he stresses, in avoiding the waste of money is to get good scientists doing research, and then

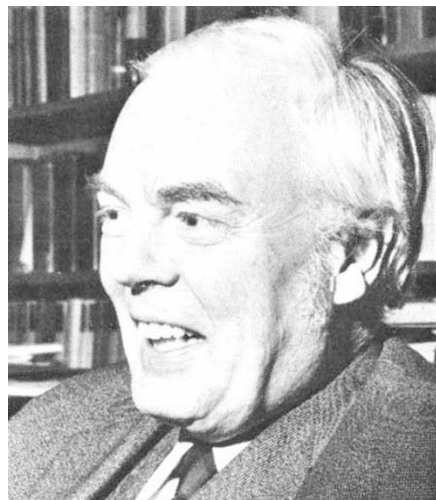
Indian science reorganised

The Indian government has now issued a list of the 17 laboratories that it intends to detach from their present position with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and relocate within user ministries (10 November, page 89). They are: ten research associations (to Industry), three museums (to Education), the Indian Institute of Petroleum (to Petroleum and Chemicals), the Road Research Institute (to Transport and Shipping), the Central Fuel Research Institute (to Energy) and the Building Research Institute (to Welfare and Housing).

In contrast to the earlier fears that the government would dismember CSIR and shatter morale, first reactions seem to be relief that the transfer has only affected laboratories most easily housed in a ministry. □

Following a Maoist path

Romanian science is being systematically ruined “on the Chinese model”, according to Dr Mihai Dediu, a Romanian mathematician recently exiled with his family to Italy after his cam-



Arthur Buller, new chief scientist

to a certain extent to follow their judgements.

The real need is not the development of ways of directing research from outside, but the successful application of its findings. “We need to keep a very sharp eye on ways in which the research being done by scientists in ivory towers can be exploited for the improvement of health care”, he says.

“In the past a number of important discoveries have lain fallow and not been exploited. Penicillin is an example where a failure to pick up the possibilities early enough meant that the industrial lead was given to the US. I am very keen to avoid this type of thing in the future”.

David Dickson

paign for genuine scientific activity.

Although throughout the Comecon block social doctrine states that science must serve the economy, in most states this is no more than a slogan; pure research continues following Brezhnev's dictum that “there is nothing more practical than a good theory”. In Romania however, following President Ceausescu's visit to China, a new trend began by which all institutes of pure research were gradually turned into what Dr Dediu describes as “little more than factories”.

Chemistry was the first to suffer—there is now no faculty of chemistry at all, only chemical engineering. The mathematics institute was destroyed in 1975 and some of the mathematicians were transferred to the Institute of Physics, some to industry. The Institute of Physics, in its turn, became the Institute of Physics and Instrument Production in autumn 1976. According to Dr Dediu, the Academy of Sciences no longer exists as a scientific forum. The whole emphasis is upon politics. Even Madame Elena Ceausescu, the wife of the leader, has been appointed an academician although she has no scientific training.

Dr Dediu himself was involved in these changes, being employed at the Mathematics Institute at the time of its destruction. He was then transferred to the Physics Institute, but was dismissed before it was re-modelled.

Vera Rich

Change into genes

Britain's House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology is to set up a subcommittee on genetic engineering under the chairmanship of Mr Arthur Palmer, Labour MP for Bristol North East. The members of the committee will be announced shortly, and it is expected that the subcommittee will begin public hearings—to which Ministers are likely to be invited to give evidence—early in the new year.

Conserving energy

THE European Commission in Brussels is considering plans to set up a group within the energy directorate concerned directly with the problems of energy conservation.

The suggestion for such an initiative was made by various environmentalist groups during the public hearings on nuclear energy held in Brussels last week, the first of a series of such hearings on issues related to energy policy.

At the end of the three-day hearings, the chairman Dr Guido Brunner, who is commissioner for energy, announced that the proposal would be seriously considered by the commission, and that it was likely to be put into effect.

The hearing, which concentrated particularly on future energy requirements, saw a number of confrontations between the pro- and the anti-nuclear lobbies, with many well-worn positions being rehearsed by either side.

Putting the case for nuclear power, for example, Dr Rudolf Guck of Badenwerk AG suggested that the declining supply of fossil fuels, leading to a steady climb in prices, would make nuclear energy an increasingly-attractive economic proposition.

According to Dr John Chessire of Sussex University, however, current forecasts of future electricity demand were too high. In addition, whatever the price of uranium, fast breeder reactors would, he claimed, be uneconomic compared with thermal reactors.

Criticism of the European Commission's own energy policy as being "obsolescent" and ignoring "the real needs of society" came from Dr Peter Chapman, director of the Energy Research Group at Britain's Open University.

In a presentation that appeared to make a particular impact on Dr

Prophet of nuclear doom

MR Tony Benn, UK Secretary of State for Energy, appeared to enjoy last Friday's debate in the House of Commons on nuclear energy.

The debate was brought by Pontypool MP Mr Leo Abse, whose constituents, he said, live within 50 miles of "one of the largest concentrations of nuclear reactors in the world . . . eight reactors in operation . . . and two more planned".

Abse, who had been briefed by Tom Burke of Friends of the Earth, was demanding a government response to the Flowers report, which indicated the dangers of a headlong dash to dependence on nuclear power. Not mincing words, Abse raised the question "is a plutonium based economy compatible with democracy?" and addressed it with some eloquence.

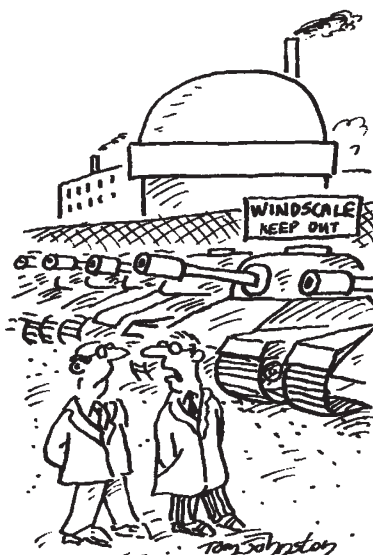
Abse is not exactly pro-nuclear. He

but not against nuclear energy as such. His points were cogent—as indeed are many of those raised by the Friends of the Earth. Tellingly, Benn was delighted with Abse's speech, which he thought "in a classic prophetic mould". Abse's, said Benn, was a "philosophical, penetrating, and perceptive speech, and I hope that it will be widely read and studied". Benn was at pains to point out that in matters of such difficulty it was worth listening to everyone and that "the pressures that are brought to bear are not—as is sometimes suggested—only those brought by the environmental lobby against the innocent nuclear power lobby". Benn went on "In my political life I have never known such a well-organised scientific, industrial, and technical lobby as the nuclear power lobby. It is not so much the Friends of the Earth as what Eisenhower might have called the nuclear industrial complex of which I am aware as a Minister."

With that view, one might have expected Benn to be more forthcoming on the question of an inquiry into the proposed building of a commercial prototype fast breeder reactor in the UK, the £2 billion CFBR1. Mr Peter Shore, Secretary of State for the Environment, has promised a fast breeder inquiry separate from the recent Windscale planning inquiry, which investigated the extension of reprocessing facilities at Windscale. Asked if the government had indeed committed itself to an inquiry on the fast breeder Benn said "We have not yet decided to set up the inquiry". And yet he added "We shall not reach a decision (on the CFBR1) until there has been an inquiry".

Mr Tom King asked for confirmation that the government would not take a decision on fast breeders until the inquiry, and suggested that the Minister had not even discussed the question of an inquiry with other Ministers. Is there progress towards an inquiry, he asked? Benn, apparently cornered, answered "I cannot undertake that there will be a debate . . . when we have settled the thermal reactor question I shall be better able to answer".

Robert Walgate



'UNFORTUNATELY, MOST OF THE PLUTONIUM WE PRODUCE GOES TO POWER OUR SECURITY SYSTEM.'

ended "If we, avaricious for the apparently easy wealth that nuclear energy could bring, enter into a Faustian pact with a meretricious atomic destiny, we may have doomed our children or grandchildren to the loss of their liberties, if not their lives".

But that style is very much Mr Abse's. In more sober moments he took a view broadly against plutonium,

Brunner and other members of the commission present, Dr Chapman claimed that the commission's policy was at least four years behind that of the UK, and that the supply and demand forecasts which it had been putting forward were inappropriate, and of a "very low standard".

"There seems to have been no

analysis of the economics of nuclear systems and no awareness of the importance of storage and transport costs", said Dr Chapman.

The next public hearing, which will be held in Brussels on 25 January, will discuss some of the problems raised by the safety aspects of nuclear energy.

David Dickson