

New Basel director changes direction

The Basel Institute for Immunology, founded in 1971 by Hoffman-La Roche, the Swiss pharmaceutical manufacturer, is soon to have a new director, the 44-year-old chemist and geneticist Fritz Melchers. Dr Melchers, already a member of the institute, will take up his appointment with effect from 1 October.

Melchers will succeed Dr Niels Jerne, the first director, who has helped to give the institute its now outstanding reputation in basic immunology. During his tenure of the post, Jerne has also fought strongly for the independence of the institute from the company which finances it, insisting on the freedom of the members of the institute (who have no other titles) to pursue whatever research appears appropriate, to publish in the scientific literature and to pay no more attention than they wish to the research interests of their parent company.

Inevitably there is now some concern that the old arm's length policy will be changed. Melchers agreed on the telephone last week that his policy may be "more friendly" than that of Dr Jerne. The new director says, however, that he intends to maintain the role of the institute as a centre for fundamental research in immunology, cell biology and molecular genetics. Applied work will have no place at the institute, he says, and researchers will be completely free to publish their results.

Melchers says that he would not have taken the job unless these conditions had been satisfied. The future of the institute has also been underwritten by the company "for a considerable period". The implication is that the integrity of the research programme will not be compromised by short-term money problems.

The institute has a small tenured staff, but provides facilities for a much larger number of visiting scientists. It was originally set up by Roche for a limited period of ten years, although Jerne has said that Roche told him it would keep the institute going "so long as the Western world did not change drastically". Jerne took this to mean that the laboratory would continue at least as long as the world took Valium, one of the company's most successful products.

Some change in the relationship between the institute and the company is nevertheless on the cards. Melchers said last week, for example, that the role of the scientific board of the institute, as well as the mechanism for providing scientific advice to Roche, are under consideration. The function of the board has been to advise the company on the scientific work of the institute and "all matters relevant thereto". Melchers said last week that "we want a board of independent scientists who will help in the exchange of ideas with the firm while maintaining the scientific integrity of the institute". The company, he said, "has a growing interest in

molecular biology and its applications", and correctly feels that the subject should be part of its research effort. Roche, said Melchers, spends a lot of money on the institute and deserves some return from it.

This does not imply that the institute will become a wing of Hoffman-La Roche research, however, Melchers says, but rather that communications between the institute and the company should be

improved. He cites the setting up of a hybridoma research group at Roche with the institute's help as an example of the improved communications he has in mind.

One present member of the board, Avrion Mitchison of University College, London, greeted Melcher's appointment with delight. "He is an able scientist, decisive, and can deal with the company."

Robert Walgate

Sitting-in in Spanish labs

DEMONSTRATIONS of scientists are uncommon events, even in Spain. On 27 May, however, more than five hundred scientists of the research centres of the CSIC (*Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas*) marched through the streets of Madrid to the Ministry of Universities and Research in one of the most spectacular events in three weeks of protest by Spanish researchers.

Hopes of a change in government policy towards science were aroused by the establishment of a democratic regime in Spain. The experience of the past three years has, however, been disappointing, despite some beneficial changes in the structure of the CSIC and universities.

It now seems that the creation of the Ministry for Universities and Research has not brought the benefits expected. In fact, the 1980 budget for research has increased by only 7.2 per cent, a figure far below the inflation rate. As a consequence, financial support for research has decreased in real terms compared even with the past level.

Thus the budget for one of the main sources of grants, *Fondo Nacional de Ayuda a la Investigación* (FNAI), was withheld for more than a year and afterwards fixed at only 2,500 million pesetas (\$35 million), one-eighth of the applications.

This may be too late to avoid the interruption of the research in certain cases. At the same time, another important source of support for research — the programme for predoctoral fellowships — has been cut by a half. This means that an average university may receive fewer than 30 fellowships — and this at a time when unemployment among young graduates is reaching dramatic proportions.

To add to these uncertainties, the abolition of the CSIC has been considered within the government and publicly discussed. A new Universities Bill (*Ley de Autonomía Universitaria*) has been presented unchanged to parliament in spite of criticism from many sections of the scientific and university communities.

Against this background, the staff of the Institute of Astrophysics and the Experimental Station of El Zaidin in Granada recently decided to sit in as a protest against "the chaotic situation existing in the CSIC". A manifesto was issued

denouncing the worsening condition of Spanish research and proclaiming that the trouble stemmed from the absence of a coherent science policy, the inadequacy of the funding for research and the low salaries and lack of promotion for scientists and technicians. Shortly afterwards, a meeting was held in Madrid by scientists and technicians and that was followed by the demonstration ending at the Ministry for Universities and Research with the reception of a delegation by the minister.

On 2 June, the minister attended the first session in Madrid of a National Congress on Science Policy after a request by the Association of Research Personnel, which consists mainly of CSIC workers. In his speech, the minister acknowledged the absence of a science policy in Spain and conceded that the present situation was caused by the low level of funding.

The day the Congress on Science Policy ended, the Ministry of Universities and Research issued a statement promising that the CSIC will not be dismantled but radically reorganized. In another statement, the ministry announced the publication of a White Paper on research and a Three-Year Plan for research. The publication of a White Paper was said to be imminent in August 1979, and a Three-Year Plan has already been promised for more than three years.

Pedro Puigdomenech

Correction

The report on 26 June of the views of the Astronomy II Committee of the Science Research Council appears to be substantially incorrect. The committee did not decide to ignore SRC policy on the appointment of postdoctoral fellows; did not offer advice to senior researchers on how best to deal with short-term appointments; and did not empower the Royal Astronomical Society to act on its behalf. The position appears to be that the Astronomy II committee did discuss the problems of short-term appointments but postponed a full-scale discussion until a meeting in October. We regret the error.

Editor, *Nature*