

German cancer centre criticized

Report urges major changes in constitution

Sweeping changes at the Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum (DKFZ) in Heidelberg have been recommended by the international commission appointed by the German Minister for Science and Technology. The proposed changes would invest the director of DKFZ with executive power, the lack of which caused the resignation of Professor Hans Neurath last year (see *Nature* 293,252; 1981).

The report, published last week by the ministry, is highly critical of the overall performance of DKFZ in basic research. Although acclaiming the quality of research by some investigators in the centre's eight institutes, particularly those of cell biology, immunology and virology, the report says that in a large number of the institute's 39 divisions, the research work is merely reliable and unimaginative. And the output of a number of scientists has amounted to little more than one unremarkable paper a year for the past decade: Overall "this does not indicate that the quality of research commissioned in DKFZ is in any way outstanding".

The centre is also criticized for its lack of collaborative ventures and its failure to take a lead in arranging multi-centre clinical trials. The commission considers that the largest cancer centre in Western Europe, employing more than 1,000 staff at an annual cost of DM90 million (£20 million), should do better.

Two main factors are said to account for the mediocre performance of DKFZ. The first is lack of effective external peer review. The second is that the constitution of the centre is such that the director does not necessarily have the power to bring about changes. "His proposals may be blocked or intolerably delayed and his position can be undermined by other proposals . . . from the Scientific Council" (a committee made up of the heads of institutes and an equal number of elected staff members). It was intolerable difficulties of this kind that Professor Neurath had "bravely attempted to overcome", says the report.

The resolution of this problem, says the commission, is of paramount importance to the future of DKFZ. It proposes that DKFZ's director (officially chairman of the executive board) should also serve as chairman of the Science Council. In this way the director could no longer be subordinate to his staff and could assume authoritative direction of the centre.

In the commission's view, the Science Council would still be a powerful advisory

group whose majority view its chairman, the director, could ignore only at his peril (his is the only senior post without tenure).

On peer review, the commission says there is no adequate system to ensure that resources are wisely distributed among a staff most of whom have unlimited tenure. Some form of peer review has periodically been carried out by the centre's Science Advisory Council (Wissenschaftliche Beirat) but the council is not required by the constitution to conduct such reviews, is too small to perform the job adequately and is open to influence from the staff.

The commission proposes that the Science Advisory Council be replaced by a committee of eight independent scientists who would be responsible for arranging regular external peer reviews of all institutes and divisions of DKFZ. The same independent scientists would also fill the eight places for scientists on the Kuratorium. No longer would three of these posts be filled by elected members of

DKFZ. The commission considers that staff members have no place on the executive board of the institute that employs them whereas the director, who is not a voting member of the Kuratorium, should be on the board.

It is on the question of "worker participation" that there is bound to be political opposition to change. Staff representation on the Kuratorium began in 1975, when it was being widely adopted in both public and private concerns throughout Germany. Dr Wolfgang Finke, now chairman of the Kuratorium, would prefer to see it retained on the grounds that the presence of staff scientists on the Kuratorium has been a useful channel of information between the staff and the trustees. If there is a problem, he feels, it arises from the individuals concerned, not the principle.

Apart from that point, Dr Finke believes that the Kuratorium should give serious consideration to all of the commission's

Yale says no to a \$33,000 grant

Washington

Yale University last week reluctantly bit one of the hands that feed it, and declined a \$33,000 grant offered by the National Science Foundation for one year beginning on 1 May. By this unprecedented act, the university also gave renewed publicity to the fact that one of its faculty, mathematics professor Dr Serge Lang, strongly objects to the US government's requirement that recipients of federal research grants should produce detailed reports of the amount of time they spend working on federally supported projects.

Dr Lang described himself on the telephone last week as one "who knows more about A21 than anybody else". The reference is to the much disputed circular A21, issued by the Bureau of the Budget (now the Office of Management and Budget, OMB) more than twenty years ago. Yale's refusal of the grant, the renewal for a third year of its support for Dr Lang's project "Number theory and elliptic curves", is due to his refusal to accept the reporting requirements.

Dr Lang also said last week that his objections to "effort reporting" were unlikely to be met by the revision of A21 now being considered by OMB, which are substantially those agreed last year between OMB and groups such as the American Association of Universities and the Council of Scientific Society Presidents.

Since the publication of the proposed revision in the *Federal Register* on 7 January, there has been a steady flood of protests from academic scientists that even the proposed revisions do not meet the objection that it is meaningless to attempt

to distinguish between time spent on teaching and time spent on research. As published, the revision of A21 would do away with the requirement for a detailed account of the time spent on various activities by faculty members supported partly by federal funds. Instead, three alternative methods of accounting for effort devoted to federal projects are proposed, one of which would allow of a certifying signature by "a person having direct knowledge of the work" and not by the faculty member as such.

In the draft revision, however, OMB has not conceded the principle urged by many academic scientists that there are circumstances, research by graduate students for example, in which it is literally meaningless to seek to distinguish between research and teaching. Opponents of OMB's accounting ambitions are able with relish to quote on this point from the report of a task force in 1968 under Cecil E. Goode, then an official of the Bureau of the Budget.

Part of the reason why A21 has become a source of contention in the past three years is that government auditors have been seeking to use it as a means of quantifying (and presumably limiting) the indirect costs added to research grants as compensation for the administrative work carried out centrally by a university. Yale was not impelled to decline the first two instalments of Dr Lang's three-year grant because of a dispensation which expired at the beginning of this year.

Under the terms of the grant offered, Yale would have been paid two-ninths of Dr Lang's salary by way of compensation for work done during the long vacation. ●