

Waste in research services damned

UK laboratories lack incentive to save costs

A damning indictment of peripheral waste in British government research establishments was published earlier this week by Sir Derek Rayner, one of the Prime Minister's favourite businessmen and her special adviser on efficiency in government. The report, based on surveys of 19 establishments and concerned exclusively with services for the support of research, suggests that savings of about a fifth in annual budgets would be possible without jeopardizing quality.

The survey is one of several being carried out of efficiency in different parts of the government's business. It consists of a summary of the several separate reports linked together by Sir Derek's own generalizations. One of his central complaints is that in government establishments the cost of support services, ranging from cleaners and doormen to specialist workshops, is lumped together as a central overhead and not apportioned to separate research projects.

The essential failure, says the report, is that neither the provider nor the user of laboratory support services has clear authority and accountability for judging value for money. Rayner says that research establishments should be reorganized in such a way that identifiable research managers are responsible for the whole cost of their projects.

In passing, the survey has uncovered a variety of memorable sources of waste. One establishment was found to have ten deliveries of internal mail each day while the National Physical Laboratory near London maintained eight vehicles that each made less than one journey a month. At the government's Building Research Establishment, a staff of six storemen handled an average of 10 transactions each a day, while the Royal Signals and Radar Establishment was found to have a stock of 17,500 items of scientific equipment with an average age of 8.7 years.

The Central Veterinary Laboratory is reported to have been breeding rats at a cost of £30 a head when suitable animals could have been bought in for about £2 each. The Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough provides itself with an air taxi service at a cost a third greater than commercial charges.

The report on the coordinated survey complains that the government research establishments hold that outside suppliers should be used only when the establishment is too busy or cannot meet the technical need. This, the report says,

"is wrong and costly".

Establishments also tend to be extravagant of land and buildings. The report says that the National Physical Laboratory could save £635,000 a year by giving up 200,000 square feet of floor space and that the Central Veterinary Laboratory should dispose of 245 acres of land now used for breeding animals uneconomically. The report points out that establishments as at present organized have no incentive to make savings of this kind.

The Rayner report also complains that establishments charge too little for services provided to outside users and so "give away . . . public money". Some establishments provide research reports free of charge when they have a "commercial value", others sell products whose cost of production has been underestimated and others undercharge for services "in order to win contracts".

The cost of the bureaucracy itself seems to be substantial. In four establishments covered by the survey on which the report is based, the cost of checking invoices externally doubled the real cost of all the items purchased. But the gravamen of the report's complaint is that "the individual manager of a scientific project is not aware

of or responsible for the actual costs of the support he consumes". The report recommends that responsibility should be transferred to project managers.

The suggested savings on annual costs amount to 14 per cent of the budget now spent on support services within the 19 laboratories and would be made chiefly by shedding 1,518 support staff, or 19 per cent of the total now employed. The report also recommends the disposal of 270 acres of land, 450,000 square feet of accommodation and 200 vehicles, thus raising £6.65 million.

Ministers responsible for the laboratories concerned have apparently agreed in principle to the report's recommendations. Government departments will be performing similar scrutinies of other laboratories in the hope of finding similar savings elsewhere. The plan is to draw up "action plans" for streamlining the support services of individual laboratories by the end of the year. Much remains to be settled, however, not least the questions of how to shed posts and how to change the jobs of researchers so as to encompass greater management responsibility. The reactions of laboratories and staff unions will be eagerly awaited. **Judy Redfern**

New prospectus for European lab

Substantial changes in the direction and style of research at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg were being put to the laboratory's council earlier this week by Dr Lennart Philipson, the director-general chosen by the council to succeed Sir John Kendrew's inaugural seven-year reign.

The plans are the outcome of consultation between Philipson and the staff of EMBL and of an almost total lack of contact between the incoming and the outgoing directors-general — ending in a most unknighly deed by Sir John. There have inevitably been clashes within the scientific advisory committee on the extent to which EMBL should pursue a structural approach to biology.

In essence, Philipson's plans call for a shift in emphasis from structural biology towards cell biology, for concentration on fewer areas of research and for better integration of the costly instrumentation division with the laboratory's biological programme. Philipson also says that EMBL's outstations at Hamburg and Grenoble should grow and become more autonomous, and that the laboratory should increase its role as an international training centre, offering more technical courses and eventually a PhD programme.

Another of Philipson's plans is to replace the system of indefinite tenure for a few of the 250 of his staff with one of rolling tenure for up to a quarter of them.

In practice, this will mean that those with tenure will always be on five years' notice. Philipson believes this to be the best way of retaining flexibility while attracting good scientists for short periods. Philipson says that in part this proposal is a response to an unexpected legacy inherited from Kendrew. As soon as he was named director-general in November 1980, he says, he asked that no additions be made to the four tenured staff without consultation either with himself or with the chairman of this council. Kendrew, however, afterwards endowed eight staff members with tenure, five of them within his last three months, without consultation. He was, it appears, quite within his rights to do so (but when asked earlier this week about his reasons refused to comment).

The intended difference in style of research in the next five years reflects a change in both time and directors-general. Whereas Kendrew encouraged certain biological themes at the laboratory, he was prepared to back individuals whose research was not closely allied to any one of them. Philipson, however, tends to the view that backing individuals was even then an outdated approach, and says that the modern need is for a team approach to major problems in biology. Philipson thus intends to concentrate the biological research of EMBL on membranes and on the process of differentiation. Membrane biology is the one area of research in which