

UK medical research

Neurochemical unit threatened

ONLY a few months after advertising its intention to spend more on research in the neurosciences, the British Medical Research Council (MRC) is taking steps to close one of its better-known units in the field, the MRC Neurochemical Pharmacology Unit at Cambridge. The decision, made known to the staff last week, comes two and a half years after the then director of the unit, Dr L.L. Iversen, announced his appointment as director of a new research laboratory established by Merck, Sharp and Dohme at Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire.

MRC's decision, described as a "decision in principle", will be controversial. The unit has in the past twenty years acquired a reputation for the development and understanding of neuroleptic drugs, chiefly by the refined application of classical pharmacological techniques. More recently, the unit has taken an interest in the histological examination of post-mortem brains, especially from people with schizophrenia.

The unit, one of several maintained by MRC, usually in close association with a university, consists of a score of people of whom perhaps a dozen are established scientists. In its heyday, the unit also played host to large numbers of postdoctoral fellows from elsewhere. The budget for the current year is £375,000.

There is some confusion about the reasons given for closing the unit, said last week to have been made necessary by the difficulty of recruiting a suitable successor to Iversen, at least within the limits of what the council had been prepared to pay for the job. The council said earlier this week that the post had been widely advertised and that the salary offered had been the equivalent of that of a university professor.

On the other hand, Dr Leslie Iversen, the previous director of the Cambridge unit, said that he was "furious" at MRC's decision in principle that the unit should be closed. He said that he had only recently been consulted about at least one eminently suitable candidate who had been interested in the job. He said he planned to write in protest to the secretary of the council, Sir James Gowans, saying that the appointment of his successor had been mishandled and that he doubted whether the council would be able to economize by closing the unit, given that many of the members of the unit were tenured members of the council's staff and that the space vacated by the dispersal of the unit would quickly be occupied by others.

Another factor in the council's decision seems, however, to have been the British Government's refusal of its request for extra funds to sustain an expansion of research in the neurosciences. The council is understood to consider that with recent developments at Imperial College, Lon-

don, Oxford, Edinburgh and Newcastle, it has done as much as could be expected to strengthen the pattern of British research in this field.

A further difficulty seems to have been the changing composition and objectives of the search committee, which at various times seems to have been anxious to confirm the previous pattern of research in the Cambridge unit and at others to wish to branch out in new directions. The search seems to have been in abeyance for a full six months early in the proceedings, when one candidate to whom the job was offered found it hard to make up his mind.

On other occasions, the committee seems inexplicably to have tried to tempt distinguished researchers from the United States with inadequate rewards. The salary offered was formally stated this week to be the equivalent of that of a university professor although it is known that at least to one candidate from overseas figures in the neighbourhood of £30,000 a year were

mentioned and not scorned.

The immediate future of the rump of the Cambridge unit is far from clear. The next step is that a management committee of council scientists will visit Cambridge to hear what plans the remaining scientists may have and eventually to make recommendations to the council.

Dr P.C. Emson said from Cambridge earlier this week that interest among potential postdoctoral fellows in work at the Cambridge laboratory had sharply declined in the past six months. He also said that MRC had only a few months ago given the unit the right to fill a research studentship from the beginning of the coming academic year but had then "taken it away again last week".

Even at this late stage, it seems that at least part of the rump could be reprieved. One possibility that has been suggested is that the remaining members of the unit might be able successfully to persuade MRC to support them with a five-year project grant. Most observers, however, consider that those concerned will quickly be tempted to take posts elsewhere.

John Maddox

High-energy physics**UK debate goes public**

THE Kendrew committee set up to review British participation in Europe's high-energy particle physics has now asked members of the research community for their views. The group particularly wants opinions about the relevance and standing of the current UK effort, technical and educational spin-off and of any problems of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN).

Others besides particle physicists may feel moved to respond: the review group will also be pleased to hear about other new areas of science, or grossly underfunded existing areas, that would benefit from a significant increase in support.

The review, under the chairmanship of Sir John Kendrew, was set in motion earlier this year at the instigation of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, which is studying the question jointly with the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC). The council expects to spend £52.6 million on high-energy particle physics in 1984-85; £35.6 million of this is the UK subscription to CERN, while most of the remainder relates indirectly to work at CERN. Strong competing claims on the science budget led to questions about whether the high cost — almost one fifth of SERC's expenditure — was justified.

The committee expects to complete its onerous task within a year, and is planning a hectic programme of activity. Apart from the obligatory visit to CERN in Geneva, it will visit other countries to see how their ideas compare with those in Britain. Germany and the United States are provisionally scheduled for visits, and the committee

will also visit British laboratories that work in particle physics.

Legal advice has been sought on the question of Britain's contractual obligations to CERN. It seems to be recognized that Britain could legally withdraw from CERN with one or two years' notice, although the political backlash would be severe. One view is that Britain is morally committed to CERN at least until the completion of LEP 1, the electron-positron collider now under construction and scheduled to start operations in 1987-88.

If, as seems possible, this view is accepted by a majority of the committee, the issues will centre on what should come after LEP. One possibility the committee hopes to look at is that of greater collaboration with the United States — although there are doubts about whether US scientists would be happy to forgo a machine based in the United States for one in Europe.

Speaking at last week's meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, CERN's director general Dr Herwig Schopper suggested that the LEP tunnel could form the basis of a future proton machine with capabilities similar to those of the planned superconducting Super Collider (SSC) but at a much lower cost. The continuing uncertainty over US commitment to the SSC may make it hard for the Kendrew committee to come to any firm conclusions.

Tim Beardsley

Submissions to the review group should be sent to: Dr Keith Root, Room 5/37, Department of Education and Science, Elizabeth House, York Road, London SE1 7PH.