

Max Planck Society faces 'hard decisions' to uphold standards

MPC/FILSER

[GÖTTINGEN] As Germany's Max Planck Society (MPS) turned 50 years old last week, its president, Hubert Markl, told those at the celebration assembly that new measures are essential to prevent the society from drifting from the forefront of research excellence.

The MPS has been home to 15 Nobel prize-winners since 1948, when it succeeded the Kaiser Wilhelm Society. The latter body had also nurtured 15 Nobel prize-winners, but its reputation was irrevocably tarnished by collaboration with the Nazi regime.

The MPS is widely believed to have been so successful because it has been able to offer generous guaranteed funding and excellent research facilities to attract the best scientists as directors of its institutes. But now, said Markl, "competition for the best researchers is growing ever harder". Top scientists are starting to turn down MPS offers, not only in eastern Germany, where living conditions are less comfortable, but also in the west.

Last year, the society decided to dig into its investments to help start an 'excellence in science' fund to improve the employment offers it can make to top scientists. Markl hopes this can be supported by a general improvement in financial conditions. "It would be a waste if we could only attract second-best scientists for this investment," he said.

The society has had to stretch its budget to pay for building up a research base in eastern Germany in the last few years, with only token



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financial support from the government. Parliament blocked a promised 5 per cent increase in the 1998 budget for the society last year, against the wishes of the government.

A positive signal came from Gerhard Schröder, the newly selected Social Democrat candidate for chancellor after next September's federal elections, albeit in the heat of election fever. In his opening address to the MPS assembly last week, he said he strongly regretted parliament's action, and backed an annual increase of 5 per cent for the society.

According to Markl, less money means that there will be more frequent closures of departments and institutes, if the society as a

whole is to respond to new scientific trends. With this in mind, the MPS is embarking on a major exercise called Max Planck 2000+, to identify future research directions for the society's 80 institutes. "This will help make the hard decisions [about closures] which the MPS has never really had to confront before."

Markl also aired his worries about the future of young scientists in the society. It is not clear, he said, whether the society's 2,500 PhD students and 3,000 postdoctoral fellows and visiting scientists are being given the best training.

Markl suggested that the MPS and universities should pool resources to create international graduate schools — an idea that universities are discussing among themselves. He said the MPS is ready "with all its resources" to take part in such developments and to offer "the highest level of international graduate school in defined scientific areas". Courses at such schools should be given in English, he added.

A second idea championed by Markl to promote the career opportunities of young scientists is the so-called 'Nachwuchsgruppe' programme. This supports small independent research groups, each headed by a talented young researcher, for up to five years. The programme is well-tried and tested in eastern Germany.

The day before the assembly, the MPS signed an agreement with the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, Israel, to exchange such young scientist groups. Markl hopes to expand this idea to other European countries, such as France.

The MPS has had a cooperation agreement with the Weizmann Institute since 1960. The agreement was partly prompted by the society's desire to atone for Germany's past treatment of Jews. Markl told the meeting that the role of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society in furthering the racist aims of the Nazi regime has been kept under wraps too long.

He also added that the MPS did not get off to an entirely blameless political start. "It is not clear how intensely and systematically the young society tried to call back former Kaiser Wilhelm Society scientists who had been driven abroad [by the Nazis]." Markl assured the assembly of his commitment to openness about those times.

Last year the MPS appointed a committee to investigate the early history of the society. "We can't bask in the reflected glory of the first decade of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, and not accept our relationship with the dark shadows which fell on science during the Third Reich," said Markl.

Alison Abbott

UK plays safe on risks from blood products

[LONDON] The British government has advised against the use of UK plasma in blood products, to protect patients from the "theoretical risk" of contracting the new variant of Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (vCJD).

On the advice of the UK Committee on Safety of Medicines, the government is to review all blood products containing UK plasma. Meanwhile the National Health Service Bio Products Laboratory, part of the National Blood Service, will be allowed to import plasma from abroad.

UK plasma, derived from between 20,000 and 66,000 donations each year, is used to make 33 licensed blood products, including coagulation factors and immunoglobulins. Some of these products could have their licences withdrawn, as long as satisfactory alternatives are available, according to Jeremy Metters, deputy chief medical officer.

The committee has also suggested that blood products should be recalled if donors are "strongly suspected" of having vCJD.

Previous product recalls were based only on confirmed cases. The latest move follows three recalls of blood products last November after donors had developed vCJD.

Frank Dobson, the health secretary, stressed that the recommended measures are strictly "precautionary" and that there is no evidence of vCJD transmission through blood or blood products. But he said it was better to be safe than sorry. "If there is even a hypothetical risk, and there are safe alternative sources of products, then it makes sense to use them."

Dobson also announced the outcome of a review of the NHS's provision of factor VIII. He said health authorities are being urged to ensure that recombinant factor VIII is made available to haemophiliacs under the age of 16, and to new patients. The review highlighted concerns over the potential danger of using factor VIII, as haemophiliacs have a high potential risk of contracting blood-borne infections.

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