

Research planning

UK needs a forum for decision

THERE should be a mechanism in Britain for directing public investment in research towards areas likely to yield economic benefit, according to a report of the Advisory Committee on Applied Research and Development (ACARD), published this week (HMSO, £4.90). But the report does not live up to its title, *Exploitable Areas of Science*, in that it fails to pick winners in which the government might invest, concentrating instead on the considerations it believes should determine investment in research.

The report is the work of a committee under Dr C.H. Reece, the director of research at Imperial Chemical Industries, which includes both academic and industrial scientists. The starting point for the study is the British view (which the committee denies) "that research cannot be organised to deliver economic returns". One of the chief conclusions is that, in the allocation of research funds, the public research councils should be more sensitive to estimates of the kinds of research that might yield economic benefit.

Like other such committees, the ACARD group wrings its hands over Britain's economic performance in recent years. Recognizing that the flow of oil from the North Sea has been one of the influences leading to the decline of British manufacturing industry and that oil will be a declining resource in the future, the committee says that research planning now should be aimed at the development of technology that will allow the maintenance of living standards when the North Sea is less prolific.

The committee says its chief task has been to decide whether deliberate research planning is feasible; it concludes that it is. But, according to the report, there is at present no forum in which these questions can be discussed and decided. ACARD asks for a process of continuing consultation with "researchers (new and established), research allocation organisations . . . and the industrial research community".

To these ends, the committee says, there should be a more systematic approach to the collection of data on the patterns of research in Britain. This echoes a growing concern that the data available on the conduct of research in Britain, even as now gathered in the annual review published by the Cabinet Office, are incomplete, unreliable and out of date.

The committee also asks that its new mechanism for research planning should include a means by which "relevant opinions and information" can be "evaluated". The committee would rely on informed discussion to reach conclusions, but it skirts around the question of who would

be involved in such a process. Thereafter, the committee says, there should be a process for allocating funds to priority areas (at least at one point, the report uses the verb "to prioritise") and a "commitment to exploit the results of science to UK benefit".

If the government follows the committee's recommendations, there will be no change in the present arrangements for channelling funds towards research, but

more resources will be spent on the gathering and evaluation of data. The report says that "there should be a small management group" to steer the process.

The committee acknowledges that its proposals would entail "changes in emphasis" of the present work of the research councils, but says that the result should be "a more rational allocation of resources to those science areas of prime national interest". On industrial research, the committee pleads for more foresight by industrial companies with the objective of defining "potentially useful fields in which to work." □

AIDS in California

State aid offered for vaccine

Washington

LEGISLATION that would "shut the door" on strict product liability for vaccines against AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is working its way through the California State Assembly, with the blessing of the two biotechnology companies closest to vaccine development. In addition to its shield from liability, the bill provides \$6 million in aid for clinical testing and \$20 million for state purchase of the vaccine to guarantee a million-dose market. Genentech and Chiron, eager to see the bill made law, say it would remove economic obstacles to vaccine development; California hopes it would induce these companies to triple their development efforts.

California ranks second in the United States for diagnosed cases of AIDS, with over 4,600 reported, and a study released last month by the state's Department of Health Services (DHS) predicts the disease will have struck 30,000 Californians by 1990. Feeling both the pressure of a public health threat and the promise of engineered immunization from companies virtually in the legislative backyard, assemblyman John Vasconcellos last year met with Genentech and Chiron to discuss ways to accelerate vaccine development.

The companies outlined the reasons that hormones and growth factors grab most of the attention in their laboratories, while investment in AIDS vaccine research remains modest. They said they were deterred by the uncertainty of the market size, the costs of clinical trials, and the threat of litigation once the vaccine reaches the public.

Vasconcellos and other California assemblymen drew up a bill to answer these concerns. The measure would permit the state to grant each of three companies up to \$2 million to defray the costs of clinical testing, the most expensive phase of drug development. If companies sold less than one million doses, California would buy the difference. And the state would also accept responsibility for

injuries proved to have resulted from vaccine use, with recovery limited to \$250,000 per case. The bill applies to California companies only, and they would still be held liable for cases involving negligence.

Most of California's legislators appear to favour the bill, which was introduced in January and heard in the Assembly judiciary committee last week. However, opposition may emerge next week, when the legislation goes before the Assembly's ways and means committee. But supporters can point to the DHS report, which expects medical costs for AIDS of \$3,500 million by 1990, and a California Manufacturers Association estimate that each employee who contracts AIDS costs his employer \$250,000. Faced with these figures, state-subsidized vaccines may seem like a bargain to Californians. **Karen Wright**

Degrees by consent

HIGHER degrees in Poland will in future be subject to party approval, according to a Polish scientist who emigrated last month. The PhD *Doctor Habilitatus* degrees can be conferred both by the universities and by the Academy of Sciences, but since 1982, there have been almost no formal doctoral studies in the universities (see *Nature* 320, 693; 1986), and graduates wishing to proceed to a higher degree can best do so by obtaining a research post in one of the institutes of the Academy of Sciences.

Until now, decisions on higher degrees awarded by the academy have been taken by the research council of the relevant institute. Some six weeks ago, however, Dr Zdzislaw Kaczmarek, the Learned Secretary of the academy, announced that from now on, he will decide, on the basis of a confidential report on the candidate from the party organization in the institute; this report will not be accessible to the members of the research council of the institute.

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