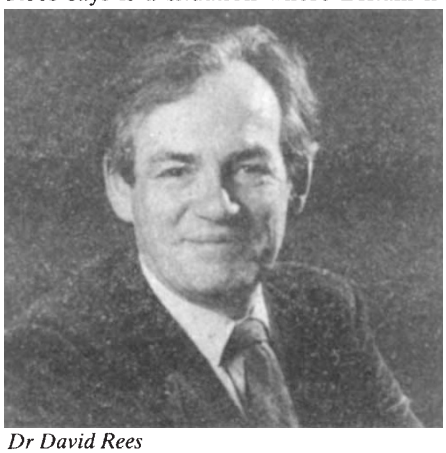
Medical Research Council cuts inevitable in coming year

London

A 20 PER cent cut in the number of short-term grants to university scientists from the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) and a decrease in the proportion of medium-term proposals that can be supported are inevitable for the coming year. The former cut is the least damaging way to absorb the financial problems of MRC, says its new secretary (chief executive), Dr David Rees. The latter is more a reflection of a cyclical increase in demand.

Financial problems, stemming from government decisions, continue to dog the attempts of the council to counteract what Rees says is a situation where Britain is



Dr David Rees

"dangerously close to not having a critical mass in modern biology". The immediate problem is that pay awards to MRC staff continue to outstrip the growth of the council's budget. But in the foreword to the 1986–87 annual report, published this week, MRC also expresses concern over the general inadequacy of funds for medical research and warns of lost opportunities.

With little relief in sight, Rees foresees a period of more stringent evaluation of the long-term units that MRC finances, more efficiency in their operation and the evolution of new criteria by which to select what research to support in universities.

Short-term 'project grants' need particular attention, he says. Fewer must be made available to established scientists in mainstream areas who have failed to obtain more solid support; more should be available for young scientists and for specialized areas of research.

As a firm believer in a mixed 'economy' of research, Rees expects some priorities to evolve — cell biology and the human genome are examples — but is also firmly committed to the support of a "continuous infrastructure". In addition, MRC will maintain its commitment to financing clinical and health-care research on important medical problems. Scientific excellence is not the appropriate sole, or even main, criterion for selection in this case acknowledges Rees, who will be least at home in this area as MRC's first secretary without a medical qualification. ("All else being equal", he says, "it would be better to have someone with medical qualifications in charge.") The balance of the activities in the mixed economy will be considered by MRC in an internal review early next year.

With more than ten years at Unilever, the new secretary is likely to forge closer links between MRC and industry. "We have a duty to transfer more ideas into industry, which will be easier if a better understanding with key companies develops", he says. This may generate extra funds as a by-product.

There is also a need for better links between the council's own research units and universities, says Rees. Small, isolated units neither have the interactions that are necessary for the best research nor contribute as they should to the educational environment. One advantage of the planned move of the Clinical Research Centre to the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in Hammersmith is that the MRC scientists will be physically associated with an educational institute. The same would apply to the National Institute for Medical Research in the fullness of time.

One immediate priority for MRC is the chronic shortage of graduate students in biomedical science, which will do nothing to help the existing shortage in high-quality postdocs.

In the past year, says Rees, MRC has recorded its first shortfall in the uptake of postgraduate grants. He puts this down to lack of motivation fuelled by the declining morale of the scientific community. An increase in the value of postgraduate grants may restore interest, he suggests.

Peter Newmark

French maths

Paris

HALF of France's top-level mathematicians will retire in the first decade of the next century and recruitment of young mathematicians is far too slow to provide replacements. The figures, released at a meeting of the two major French mathematics societies at Palaiseau last week, are particularly galling as France prides itself on being the third country in mathematics after the United States and the Soviet Union. France has six Fields medallists.

A boom in recruitment in the 1970s was followed by a dramatic decline in the 1980s with the result that 1,130 out of 2,280 university mathematicians are aged between 42 and 49, with only 139 under 35. Recuritment is running at 55–60 posts a year, whereas 75–100 are needed to ensure that a shortage will not develop early next century.

Peter Coles

Corporate power in universities opposed

Tucson, Arizona

A WASHINGTON-BASED organization that helped to mobilize scholars against research on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) has now turned its attention to fighting what it sees as excessive corporate influence in academic life.

The National Coalition for Universities in the Public Interest was founded in 1984 with the help of consumer activist Ralph Nader because of concern that pro-consumer faculty members were being dismissed and Nader's sources "were drying up", explains David Noble, professor of history at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

During the past two years, the group has helped to organize two conferences for anti-SDI activists and now works with the Boston-based Committee for Responsible Genetics to discourage research related to biological warfare. It is sponsoring several studies on corporate 'invasion' of universities and helps faculty members who believe they have been dismissed because of their views.

Leonard Minsky, executive director of the coalition, believes corporations have become more involved in universities because of increased concern about US economic competitiveness.

Two federal acts have made close links between universities and corporations more attractive. In 1980, the Small Business University Patenting Act took a first step by allowing universities to hand out exclusive rights for the manufacture and distribution of new products developed through publicly funded research. Previously, exclusive rights were not granted.

The Research Development Loan Program further stimulated corporate involvement by providing tax concessions for companies that financed university research. Minsky believes that basic science suffers as more emphasis is put on short-term, applied research.

The group maintains a telephone hotline, which it says receives about 20 calls a day from faculty members concerned about job security because of their political views.

By late January, the coalition expects to publish a litigation handbook that includes a list of resources by state and of where to go for help as well as an academic defence strategy for faculty in trouble.

Elizabeth Pennisi