

Ireland's new biotechnology venture puts marketing first

Galway

THE government of the Republic of Ireland has cheered at least some academic researchers by setting aside IR£1.5 million to help establish BioResearch Ireland, a new contract research organization designed to place contracts for commercial work with university and research institute laboratories. The government's ambitions were described here last week by Ireland's first Minister for Science and Technology, Dr Sean McCarthy.

By international standards, the Republic of Ireland's universities are small, as are their research budgets, while the present minority government is embarked on a programme to cut public spending that may make things worse. Optimistic biotechnologists now hope they may be exempted.

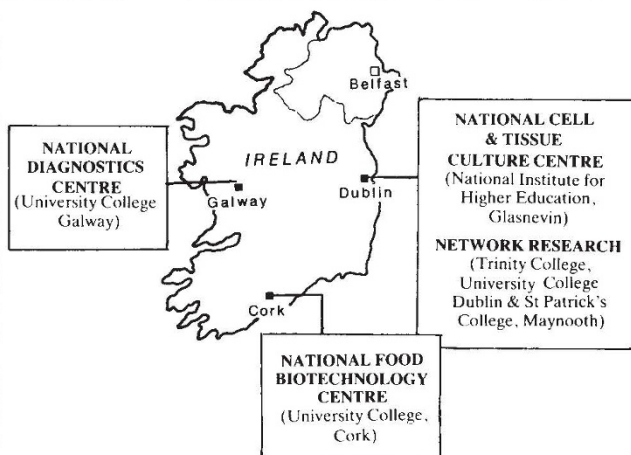
So far, three new research centres have been equipped and staffed at existing laboratories. The National Cell and Tissue Culture Centre, the National Food Biotechnology Centre and the National Diagnostics Centre, already supported by government funds, will now offer, through BioResearch Ireland, contract research and development services to industry. They will also seek industrial collaboration for their own projects.

Barry McSweeney, director of BioResearch, says that part of the IR£1.5 million being provided by the government will be used to set up a system of "network research" to provide researchers not already involved at one of the new centres with equipment and assistance. The two

Dublin universities (Trinity and University colleges) will be drawn in, as will St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

McSweeney says that his organization, which will "commercialize the entire national effort in biotechnology", will be run on strictly commercial lines. Work will be dropped if there is no commercial benefit in prospect, and there will be no direct support for basic research (which nevertheless will benefit indirectly from the availability of equipment), which will remain the responsibility of the Irish Science and Technology Agency, EOLAS.

The agency, formed in January last year by the merger of the previous National Board for Science and Technology and the



Institute for Industrial Research Standards, has a budget of IR£11 million, less by more than IR£1 million than the combined budgets of its predecessors. Prime Minister Charles Haughey's promise during last year's election to cut spending has now materialized in offers of voluntary redundancy to science administrators.

The hope of privatizing a whole sector of science spending has obvious attractions in that context. The next eighteen months should tell whether BioResearch Ireland gains the momentum to accomplish that. So far, only one company has announced a deal with BioResearch. The laboratory instrument maker Beckman is to cooperate on the development of new assay techniques and instrumentation. McSweeney says that other deals are pending but are confidential for the time being, as is his business plan, but that his target for 1988 should be met in the first four or five months.

Ireland may have a trump card to play in attracting industrial partners — the regional development fund of the European Communities, which can help non-Irish companies build factories and otherwise help to establish themselves in Ireland.

Charles Wenz

New biology centre

Two of Britain's wealthiest medical research charities are to set up a major new centre for developmental biology at the University of Cambridge. The Cancer Research Campaign (CRC) and the Wellcome Trust will give the university £4.6 million and £5 million, respectively, to build the centre and run it for five years.

The CRC presently supports a large developmental biology unit in the university's zoology department, under John Gurdon and Ron Laskey. One of the principal reasons for establishing a 'centre of excellence' is to help provide a much-needed focus for talented young scientists who might otherwise be tempted to the United States or into industry. The centre will nominally consist of Wellcome's 'Centre for Developmental Biology' and the CRC's 'Centre for Cell and Molecular Biology', each with its own director.

Wellcome's contribution forms part of its policy to support long-term ventures following an increase in the Trust's income in February 1986 after it sold 21 per cent of its shareholding in the Wellcome Foundation Ltd (now Wellcome plc). The two-year period during which the Trust agreed to sell no more shares has now expired, giving rise to speculation that the release of a further tranche of shares is imminent. S.L.H.

AIDS drug patent

A US patent was granted last week to Burroughs Wellcome for the drug azidothymidine (AZT), marketed as Retrovir, the only drug so far approved for the treatment of AIDS. Patents are also being sought in 40 other countries where the use of AZT has been approved. Burroughs Wellcome, the US arm of Wellcome plc, has no plans to license to any other company the production of AZT, for which it charges about \$8,000 per patient per year. Also last week, the Bristol Myers company received licences to develop two related anti-AIDS drugs, dideoxyadenosine and dideoxyinosine. The National Cancer Institute intends to begin human clinical trials of the new compounds soon. D.L.

Ministers say yes

Two research programmes proposed by the European Community at its ministerial council meeting were approved by the European Parliament on 10 February (see *Nature* 329, 753; 1987). The information technology programme, ESPRIT II will get 3,200 million ECU (about £2,200 million), while BRITE, the technology transfer programme, will get an extra 60 million ECU. With 103 BRITE projects already funded, allowing joint research between universities and industrial partners, the extra grant will enable 66 more projects to start. The European Parliament also agreed the second five-year science programme, with a budget of 165 million ECU. P.C.

Somalis reprieved

Washington

Two Somalis whose plight has been taken up by the US National Academy of Sciences (*Nature* 331, 196; 1988) have had their death sentences commuted to life imprisonment by President Siad Barre. The two, Suleiman Nuh Ali and Abdi Ismail Yonis were among 8 political detainees sentenced to death on 7 February.

The academy last month urged the Somali government to release details about the cases of Ali and Yonis as well as 11 other scientists and engineers all of whom had been imprisoned since 1982. The 13 are accused of political crimes for which little or no evidence has been presented.

Joseph Palca