

British make £11 million claim

London

THE Clinical Research Centre (CRC) of the Medical Research Council (MRC) has been chosen as the hub of Britain's part in mapping and sequencing the human genome. CRC will house a resource centre responsible for assembling and distributing databases and DNA libraries as well as for substantial technical developments, both in computing and sequencing.

The planners hope their decision will also attract the administrative centre of the Japanese Human Frontiers Science Programme and the European office of

the Human Genome Organization (HUGO) to the same site at Northwick Park in north London.

MRC's decision follows the British government's allocation of extra research funds for the next three years, of which £11 million has been earmarked for the genome project. While this is small compared with US spending (\$27.6 million this year and \$100 million next), it is as much as the European Community plans to spend (see accompanying story).

Sydney Brenner, the chief architect of the plan, says that the arrangement should

give Britain a voice in international discussions. "We will now have trade goods", he says. Brenner's own laboratory at Cambridge will focus on the isolation and characterization of new cDNAs, while the resource centre will concentrate on building a library of accessible DNA clones.

The choice of CRC will be controversial. CRC is due to merge with the Royal Postgraduate Medical School at Hammersmith and is not particularly strong in human genome work. But MRC plans to redeploy resources at CRC into human genetics, while there is ample space both for MRC's own centre and potential tenants.

MRC also plans to guide the overall direction of British human genome research by a coordinating committee and a scientific advisory board, whose priorities will influence which projects it finances. The board will be much like that which, since 1987, has coordinated the human genome interests of MRC and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF).

ICRF, which has been keen to bid to provide the MRC resource centre with a DNA probe bank, has developed a particular interest in the European Community project and is also a partner in the EUREKA project to automate DNA cloning and sequencing. **Peter Newmark**

GENOME MAPPING

Europe's plans turn towards talk

Munich

THE European Community's embattled (and now renamed) Human Genome Analysis proposal has been much changed by a debate last month in the European Parliament. The proposal calls for an in-

vestment of ECU 15 million (about £10 million) over three years for mapping and sequencing the human genome.

The parliament accepted most of the changes suggested by its committee on energy, research and technology led by representative Benedikt Härlin of the West German Green Party, who was a vocal critic of the original programme. Among the 38 amendments now adopted are a ban on somatic gene therapy within the framework of the programme; a study on the history of eugenics; and the dropping of most of the medical and industrial justifications in the text of the original programme.

If the amendments are enacted, much of the money for the programme will be diverted from the support of basic science and computer studies to the support of public debate over the ethics of the programme. The main purpose of the changes, says Härlin, is to prevent "the money from simply being thrown into technology". Instead, there should be "political control" over the programme from the beginning.

An official at Brussels says that the commission would accept most of the proposed amendments in some form, especially those strengthening the rights of persons to protect genetic information about themselves. But there will probably be some dispute in the member states over some of the other amendments — they might not go far enough to satisfy West Germany, but they might go too far for the British and French.

The proposal must now be discussed by the European council of research ministers before being sent back to the parliament for the next round of debate. Once it has the approval of a majority of the 12 council members and the parliament, the proposal can finally be enacted by the commission. The intended starting date, 1 January 1989, will then be even more distant. **Steven Dickman**

US PROJECT

Bio-information centre

Washington

DAVID J. Lipman has been appointed director of the new Biotechnology Information Center set up within the National Library of Medicine, part of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). The management of NIH is known to be dismayed that the centre has been established separately from the office established to coordinate efforts to map and sequence the human genome.

The centre was established last year by legislation authorizing the human genome project, and will develop software and database systems for handling the large amount of data emerging from the project. Congress appropriated \$8 million for the centre for 1989, some of which will go towards partial support for the GenBank and Protein Information Resource databases. Twelve bio-informatics specialists will work at the centre, but James Ostell, the developer of the Pustell DNA sequence manipulation software, is the only one hired so far.

Lipman developed software for searching sequence databases while working elsewhere at NIH, and has served on the advisory board for GenBank. He will be coordinating the centre's programmes with the information advisory subcommittee of the NIH Human Genome Office, composed of David Botstein from Genentech, Mark Pearson from DuPont, Jaime Carbonell from Carnegie-Mellon and George Cahill from Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

Carol Ezzell

NEWS IN BRIEF

Research! America

Washington

FORMER US Senator Lowell Weicker will head a newly formed alliance of health-related organizations designed to drum up public support for biomedical research. The alliance, dubbed *Research! America*, will not lobby Congress for support, but will instead conduct a campaign to persuade people that biomedical research is worth the money being spent on it, that it needs more money to continue to thrive and that becoming a researcher is a worthwhile career goal. Weicker believes the real remedy for runaway health care costs will be research for new therapies, not a band-aid approach to health care financing.

Weicker's presence at the head of *Research! America* should help it get off the ground. As a Senator, he was a vocal proponent of research, and a strong supporter of the National Institutes of Health. The alliance expects to raise about \$2 million per year. **J.P.**

Military review

Paris

THE French minister of defence, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, has ordered a six-month review of defence research. The study will be carried out by Jean-François Delpech, research director at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique). At FF30,000 million (\$4,840 million), the defence budget is about one-third of French research spending. **P.C.**