nature

5 October 2000 Volume 407 Issue no 6804

Strategy for Framework 6

The European Commission is embarking on plans for its next Framework programme of research and development. Linking it to a broader strategy is advisable, provided political goodwill is preserved.

With half-time just passed, the performance of the European Commission's fifth Framework programme of research has been weighed — and found wanting. Scientists, research lobbyists and review panels all complain about its complicated rules and application procedures. The commission itself now appreciates the depth of the concern over the programme, and that it tends to discourage scientists with its need to demonstrate relevance to socio-economic goals (see *Nature* **398,** 1; 1999).

What is to be done? Don't start from here, is one response. Over the next few weeks, the commission will be developing the outlines of the sixth Framework programme (FP6), due to start in 2003. Research commissioner Philippe Busquin is intent on basing FP6 on new foundations by interweaving it with the concept of a single 'European research area' (see *Nature* **405,** 873; 2000).

Under FP6, the commission plans to play a more strategic role. Alongside simplifying the rules, concentrating on fewer priorities and decentralizing project funding, more emphasis will be placed on creating equal conditions and opportunities for scientists throughout the European Union. The commitment to improving Europe's human research potential and technological innovation will continue. Administrative issues, such as planning and co-financing joint research infrastructures, are intended to take precedence over direct funding of small, scattered research projects.

But these visions will only materialize if Busquin manages to bring the member states on board. The funding priorities under FP5 — the life sciences, information technology, energy and the environment — deserve further multinational support. If the commission draws back on project funding, the only means of replacing it will be from the member states' budgets. That is why Busquin tirelessly emphasizes the importance of networking and the joint execution of national funding agencies' programmes. But although he has met with positive responses from member states so far, the FP6 plans may put a stop to all that. For legal, financial and perhaps also political reasons, many national funding agencies are not ready to open their programmes to researchers Europe-wide. Moreover, there is insufficient incentive to integrate national funding efforts, despite expressions of goodwill.

A step-by-step approach is essential, therefore. The single European research area is a noble goal, and FP6 is a major opportunity in that direction. But it would be unwise to put too much hope in the goodwill of the member states. Under an improved and streamlined process, project funding should remain a key task for the commission — at least until independent pan-European science agencies are established. Regrettably, all the signs are that that is more than a Framework programme away. ■

Pigs, society and opacity

International agencies need to learn the lessons of the past about ill-advised secrecy.

The ethics and safety of xenotransplantation will be debated by experts, representatives of governments and international organizations at a three-day meeting in Paris this week. One likely outcome is a joint position paper and recommendation by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Pre-meeting information points out that, although clinical trials of xenotransplantation are already happening (notably, of fetal pig neural cells and pig liver cells), the issues, and in particular the risks of infectious disease spreading to humans, "have yet to be fully addressed internationally". The issue is contentious, with huge private investment fuelling a rush to clinical trials while others want a moratorium on trials.

But journalists will be denied access to the meeting, and must make do with a press conference at the end. One lesson from the BSE crisis and the controversy over genetically modified organisms is that transparency is the key to obtaining public confidence in the process of drafting recommendations on areas where risks exist alongside scientific uncertainty. Like it or not, the media (not all of which are mischievous or incompetent) remain the principal channel for transmitting information to an increasingly concerned public, and for analysis of the complex issues involved.

Moreover, in the public interest, journalists must be aware, at first hand, of the differences in the views aired. International organizations have often published the proceedings of such meetings only after considerable delays, and when the texts have been stripped of the more controversial issues as national governments have been given the right to censor them.

An opportunity to remedy this has been squandered by the organizers of the Paris meeting. Media participation at such meetings should be encouraged, and organizers should invest in providing comprehensive background material in comprehensible language to help journalists get up to speed. Openness carries risks: complex issues may be misunderstood or misrepresented. But in the long run it is preferable to closed debate.

A request by a *Nature* journalist to attend the meeting met with the explanation that it was originally to have been open to the media, but that this was vetoed by WHO and governments, some of whom argued — incorrectly — that "journalists weren't interested in spending hours and hours in meetings".

OECD staff appear dismayed by their partners' decision, and admit that this raises an issue: the need for international organizations to develop clear and mutually acceptable policies *vis-à-vis* media participation. Indeed, and not a moment too soon. Meetings of committees that offer advice to the US government are required to be open under the Federal Advisory Committee Act. In fact, there is no reason that meetings of international agencies should not be broadcast live on the web for all to judge. Both OECD and WHO have the technical capacity. What is stopping them? Inertia, perhaps. But it is surely an obsolete notion that risk is best handled in the closed corridors of selected 'experts' and government agencies, far from the public eye. ■