Historic Bart's fights for its life under medical school reorganization

London. The British government is having second thoughts about a plan to close St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical School in London that has generated more than four hundred letters of protest from scientists around the world.

Teaching and research at the school — affectionately known as Bart's — would be transferred to the Royal London Hospital Medical College in East London under proposals submitted to the government for the rationalization of London's health services by a committee headed by Sir Bernard Tomlinson. The merger would require Bart's to sell its current buildings, including its Great Hall adjacent to the old Smithfield meat market.

A spokesman for the Royal London, with which Bart's has been linked in a relatively loose federation for several years, said last week that a full-scale merger would be welcomed. "We believe that by joining with Bart's we would have a greater critical mass than we have now, and that can only be good for research."

However, after a meeting last week with John Major, the prime minister, the secretary of state for health, Virginia Bottomley, was widely reported as planning to hold back from immediate implementation of the more radical proposals in the Tomlinson report. In particular, she is expected to endorse an evolutionary change that might incorporate Bart's own counter-proposal that it should withdraw from treating general patients and concentrate on special conditions, such as cancer and AIDS.

Hostility to the merger with the Royal London remains high at Bart's — the hospital was founded in 1123 and the medical school in 1662 — and is based primarily on concerns about maintaining the close relationship between clinical and basic research, as well as between different research disciplines, which the medical college has built up in recent years. "This is an environment which provides the right mix of disciplines for me, and where I can do what I want to do", says AIDS researcher Tony Pinching; "You can't transplant an ethos."

The Tomlinson report reflects two related changes being pushed by the Conservative government. The first is in the organization of National Health Service hospitals. Based on the concept of an 'internal market', the hospitals are now required to contribute directly to the costs of specialist services; constraints in funding for this in regional hospitals have reduced the number of patients attending specialist services in London, and thus the availability of research subjects (see *Nature* 357, 617; 1992). The second change has been to encourage

universities to rationalize their research funding, concentrating on building up centres of scientific excellence and closing down or merging weaker research departments.

Combining these principles, Tomlinson recommended that all but one of London's nine undergraduate medical schools be merged into four faculties of medicine within the multi-faculty colleges of the University

Will Bart's doors stay open?

of London. Undergraduate clinical teaching would be increasingly dispersed to hospitals outside the centre of the city. In contrast, clinical laboratories would be concentrated in a limited number of inner-city teaching hospitals, these being "as far as possible close to a basic science base".

Not surprisingly, medical schools that stand to benefit from the changes have reacted favourably to the report. For example, researchers at University College Medical School — which recently linked up with Middlesex Hospital — have welcomed the suggestion to strengthen the connection and to proceed with the joint construction of a new teaching and research block.

A more cautious response has come from the medical profession. The British Medical Association has emphasized that, if there is to be a rationalization of medical schools, "it

is essential that successful research teams should not be split up but should be relocated en masse". Similarly, a working party representing the medical royal colleges, which oversee the training of doctors, says that the necessary closure and rationalization of hospitals and units must be planned in a way that protects the research.

The likely losers from a radical reorganization have been mounting a campaign to persuade the government to modify Tomlinson's proposals. Last Friday, for example, a petition containing half a million signatures was delivered to 10 Downing Street by staff from the Royal Marsden Hospital (which specializes in cancer treatment) and the Royal Brompton National Heart and Lung Hospital. The report recommends a merger of both with the Charing Cross Hospital, a step the institutions see as potentially damaging to their scientific reputations. A similar number of signatures has been collected in defence of Bart's.

One important factor in the college's favour is the poor state of the London property market, and the fact that, because most of its buildings are historic monuments, commercial development would inevitably be hampered by planning restrictions.

The Tomlinson report suggests that the cost of rationalization should be financed primarily from the sale of the assets of medical schools. In particular, it valued the Bart's site and buildings at about £160 million. At the college itself, however, this is felt to be a wild overestimate; its own evaluation suggests a value of £18 million or less. A study commissioned by the University of London concludes that implementing the proposals could cost the university between £74 and £135 million.

Although relatively small in terms of what is spent by the health service, this would represent a major expenditure for the higher education system. The government's response, expected in the middle of next month from Bottomley, will be determined in large measure by whether it is prepared to meet this sum.

Meanwhile at Bart's, they are not dropping their guard, and point out that rumours of a reprieve are speculative. "This place has a spirit that we have a responsibility to defend", says Lesley Rees, professor of endocrinology and dean of the college.

David Dickson

Correction

Regrettably, the map accompanying our supplement on Nordic science (see *Nature* 360, 509–528; 1992), which was intended to remind readers of the geography of Scandinavia, inadvertently omitted Poland. *Nature* apologizes for this omission.