Driving UK health research by responding to users' needs

London. Health managers know — or should know — best. That is the main thrust of a strategy for research and development (R&D) in Britain's National Health Service (NHS) given an extra push last week by Mrs Virginia Bottomley, the health secretary.

Bottomley says the Department of Health intends to use the £60 million a year it spends on R&D to help create an "evaluative culture", enabling regional health managers to make the most cost-effective use of advances in science and medicine. More bluntly, health research is now one means of achieving the government's goal of increased efficiency in the health service.

To this end, funding will be focused on tasks such as assessing and broadcasting the effectiveness of new health technology, ranging from key-hole surgery to gene therapy. Funds will also be targeted on research needs identified by clinicians and health managers. More controversially, lower priority will be given to projects defined primarily by the research community.

The new strategy follows criticism three years ago by the House of Lords select committee on science and technology that the NHS lacks a coherent approach to biomedical research. It also reflects two government priorities: keeping a lid on public spending, and achieving better value for money in spending health service funds.

Combining these goals has been the prickly task of Michael Peckham, formerly head of the British Postgraduate Medical Federation in Hammersmith, who was appointed two years ago as the health department's first director of R&D (a post whose creation was a central recommendation of the House of Lords committee).

In its initial response to the Lords report in 1991, the health department signalled its readiness to give up being a passive recipient of new technology, and to establish a coherent R&D programme (*Nature* 351, 7; 1991). A new report, published last week as *Research for Health*, describes progress so far and several fresh initiatives.

The main message is that the government remains committed to letting managers and users, not investigators, shape the pattern of health research in Britain. The new R&D programme seeks to achieve this by integrating R&D into the management and practice of the NHS.

Multidisciplinary groups of clinicians and health managers have already been set up in some fields to draw up short-lists of research priorities, which will subsequently be funded through regional health authorities. Two reviews have already been completed — in mental health and cardio-

vascular disease; there are others in topics from cancer to dentistry.

A new centre, the Cochrane Centre, has been set up in Oxford to help researchers design and evaluate clinical trials. And a standing group on health technology was

Michael Peckham: charged with getting value for (less) money.

created in February to help the NHS identify what technology it should promote.

Support for university-based research is to be concentrated on three or four multi-programme centres. Proposals are already being received for the first, on primary health care; Peckham announced last week that the department is soon to invite proposals for a second, covering research-based clinical medicine.

There is also to be a national R&D information network, to be completed by the end of the year as a tool for health managers. Central to the network will be one or two co-ordinating centres, for which bids have also been requested, to develop new techniques for collating and disseminating information on recent research.

Many elements of the new strategy have received a broad welcome from the research community. But some also worry about their implementation — as well as the commitment to cost-saving that underpins them.

Although concentrating research funds on large multidisciplinary centres may bring increased value for money, by forcing other research groups into the competitive world of contract research, it risks undermining

the strengths and long-term perspectives of smaller specialist research units.

"The new strategy could reduce the science-push from groups outside the main centres, even though experience has shown that these groups often come up with the most novel ideas" says Bleddyn Davies, professor of social services at the University of Kent, and chairman of the Association of Department of Health Funded Researchers.

Ken Judge, director of the King's Fund Institute in London, warns that the government's concentration on cost-effectiveness in the health service has distracted attention from other criteria for allocating both services and research funds, particularly equitable access by patients.

Finally, the question of money. Although the department has promised to increase research funding from 1.0 to 1.5 per cent of its overall budget, few details have yet been published of what extra funds will be available — or where they will come from.

Researchers are justified in feeling nervous. Ironically, the spirit of the seventeenth century physician William Harvey is being invoked to justify the importance of linking fundamental and clinical research — precisely at a time when Harvey's own institute, St Bartholomew's Hospital, appears to be heading for oblivion, a victim of the combined pressures of rationalization and cost-cutting in London's medical services.

David Dickson

Selling science

London. William Waldegrave, Britain's science minister, announced last week that the government is to provide grants worth £100,000 from the budget of the Office of Science and Technology to support projects aimed at improving the public understanding of science.

The new scheme delivers a promise in the recent White Paper to promote a greater awareness of science. It is intended to complement efforts by outside organizations such as the Wellcome Trust and the Gatsby Foundation, which already runs a major programme designed to raise knowledge about technology among school children.

"Projects can range from science events to new information databases to science-by-mail schemes," Waldegrave told a meeting of the Association of British Science Writers. "We have an open mind." He also said that one of the government's aims in launching the scheme is to find out more about the relative effectiveness of different approaches and strategies.

D.D.