

French research moves to meet public needs

Paris. The French biomedical research organization, INSERM, has launched a major initiative to speed up the research community's response to society's requirements.

The initiative is designed to meet growing public demand that science should meet the needs of society. The result will be a new service of "collective expertise" that will organize task forces of researchers to produce quick answers to contemporary questions of public health, as well as analyses of potential health hazards and opportunities.

Philippe Lazar, director-general of INSERM, says that the new service is aimed at "short-circuiting" the traditional research system.

The research timescale, he argues, creates a delay in the integration of current knowledge into the thinking of governments and companies. "It's now often more urgent

to take stock [of existing knowledge] than to launch new research," he says.

Lazar's idea is that researchers are best placed to sift through the avalanche of increasingly complex scientific papers in search of trends that are pertinent to decision-makers. In practice, a new office within INSERM's department of partnership for economic and social development will coordinate a series of *ad hoc* multidisciplinary task forces composed of INSERM researchers and outside experts, which will produce reviews on political, economic, and industrial issues within six months of a request.

Researchers who chose to participate in the initiative will be paid for doing so, at teaching rates, on top of their normal salaries.

INSERM has already carried out studies, for example, on the effects of low-frequency radiation on health (commissioned by

Electricité de France), the health hazards for pregnant women of VDUs, and which contraceptive pills should be available on prescription. One of the first contracts to be carried out by the new service will be an assessment of the research strategy of a French pharmaceutical company.

Customers will be charged between FFr 300,000 and FFr 500,000 for such services. But Lazar emphasizes that "collective expertise" is not a profit-making consultancy. The charges will simply cover costs.

One possible conflict, admits Lazar, is between INSERM's duty to publish, and the demand of some customers for confidentiality. He says that INSERM will negotiate for as much open access as possible, but that in some circumstances, companies, for example, may be allowed exclusive access to an expert opinion for a certain period before it is made public.

The new service will also produce expert opinions on its own initiative. Part of the thinking behind this is to provide an early warning system. Indeed, INSERM officials say it is partly a response to the acknowledged failure of the French research community to recognize and respond to the danger posed by the contamination of French blood supplies in the early 1980s.

The first such study will be an assessment of potential health risks of human products used in therapeutics. Lazar reckons that such prospective studies will not only anticipate issues of public health but will also provide fresh insights into INSERM's own research strategy. **Declan Butler**

Competitiveness threat "underrated"

Brussels. The "sheer scale" of the threat of loss in Europe's industrial competitiveness has been "largely underestimated", says a group of leading European industrialists. The message comes in a report to the European Commission by the Industrial Research and Development Committee of the European Commission (IRDAC), an advisory committee made up of leading industrialists. It called on the European Union (EU) to encourage greater collaboration between industry and educational institutions to counter the threat.

The report, *Quality and Relevance, the Challenge to European Education*, will add momentum to Jacques Delors' call in his recent white paper on 'competitiveness, growth and unemployment' (see *Nature* 386, 599; 1993), for Europe to put greater emphasis on education and training.

The council of ministers and the European Parliament will soon consider approving a massive increase in funding for two new EU education programmes. The commission has proposed increasing spending by two-thirds to ECU1.01 billion (US\$1.16 billion), within a new programme called SOCRATES. It also wants to double support for vocational training schemes to ECU801.8 million.

Yves Farge, the chairman of IRDAC, says that Europe's educational institutions are not adapting quickly enough to "the third industrial revolution". To counter this, IRDAC urges the EU to increase collaboration between industry and education in its programmes.

In particular, it recommends creating more apprenticeships, generalizing student and staff placements in companies throughout the EU and the sharing of training materials. A commission official

says that the EU intends to fund consortia made up of companies and educational institutions to develop such projects.

Among other things IRDAC urges the EU to do is to encourage mutual recognition of educational qualifications among members and arrange that students living in one member state will be entitled to comparable education in any other. IRDAC also wants the EU to promote foreign language learning and distance education, and collect statistics on education and training. **Declan Butler**

Spanish science plan stresses applications

Barcelona. A new strategy for publicly funded science in Spain to come into effect at the end of this year is expected to emphasize applied and multidisciplinary research.

The new blueprint — which will give a much bigger role to the Ministry of Industry — is being prepared by the secretariat of the National Plan for Research and Development (NPR&D) at Spain's Ministry of Education and Science and has so far not been discussed outside the government.

Explaining the proposal, the research secretary, Elias Fereres, says: "We have to make the transition from investigation in small specialized groups to wider interdisciplinary groups, more integrated with the public sector." Fereres denies that the new plan will kill off basic research. "It is only a question of placing the incentives elsewhere," he says. But he accepts that some established lines of research "are bound to suffer".

Another controversial aspect of the plan is its exclusion of specific programmes for the autonomous regions. One region — Catalonia — is pushing for power-sharing schemes which the central government is not keen to

concede. The new plan would enhance an advisory council of the autonomous regions, which up to now has been inoperative.

Fereres says the plan will give support to public-sector industry, which is the primary investor in research and development in Spain. Favoured sectors include agro-business, food, environment, materials science, transport, reforestation, and industrial electronics.

The new plan tries to counter criticism that the current NPR&D has failed to set clear priorities for the application of research to industry. One proposal for dealing with this was the creation of a new agency for technology transfer, but this was discarded due to the difficulties in trading-off the interests of the ministries concerned.

Current thinking favours generating demand from industry. A new agency will help the NPR&D to detect areas of industrial interest where multidisciplinary groups of scientists and researchers could act. The first version of the plan will be ready before summer. By autumn, the research programmes will be open for bids.

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