

UK research council plans shake-up of biomedical awards

[LONDON] Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC) is finalizing details of a major shake-up in the way that it distributes research grants. In future, requests for programme grants will be considered only if they form part of a group submission. The council is also said to be planning to abandon individual 'project' grants.

Although no details of the proposed changes have been publicly released, it is believed that they are intended to streamline the administration of grants and provide a greater focus to the roughly £300 million (US\$480 million) a year of research activities that the MRC supports in universities and in its own research units.

Some researchers have expressed concern that the requirement that grant proposals be submitted as part of a bid from a consortium containing a minimum number — possibly three — of separate UK-based research groups could reduce their flexibility. There is a worry that high-performing groups might find themselves required to team up with less productive research teams.

But the MRC is said to feel that the new structures are an acceptable compromise between traditional investigator-initiated research projects and excessive central direction. The MRC, like other research councils, has been under strong pressure from the government to cut administrative costs. Details of the new arrangements are due to be released on 30 May.

Bomb pioneer warns of 'pure fusion' threat

[WASHINGTON] Hans Bethe, who was head of theoretical physics in the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb in the Second World War, has written to President Bill Clinton calling for a ban on research — including computational experiments "or even creative thought" — that could lead to new types of nuclear weapons. Bethe says various research approaches being pursued in the United States and in Russia could lead to "pure fusion" weapons, which would produce fusion without need for the "primary" fission stage which triggers existing hydrogen bombs.

The proliferation of such weapons would be difficult or impossible to control because their manufacture would not require the expensive fissile isotopes used in current devices. The 90-year-old physicist says that no research directed at new weapons is included in the stockpile stewardship programme at the US nuclear weapons laboratories. But he calls for a declaration banning it in the run-up to consideration of

the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by the US Senate, "to discipline the bureaucracy, and to reassure the world" of America's intentions.

Ho joins Montagnier in AIDS centres project

[WASHINGTON] The medical entrepreneur who recently lured Luc Montagnier, the co-discoverer of HIV, from the Pasteur Institute in Paris to New York city now plans to enlist David Ho, a leading AIDS scientist at the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center in New York, in a project to establish a chain of for-profit AIDS research and treatment centres in that city.

Bernard Salick, who will take on the project through a new company he has founded, Bentley Health Care, told *The New York Times* that his aim is to make New York "the center of research and the center of treatment" for AIDS. He said his enterprise has "very significant" backing from large drug companies, insurers and hospital chains in the United States and Europe.

Ho, he said, will be his chief adviser on the project. He added that he is also determined to enlist the help of Robert Gallo, the other HIV co-discoverer and a rival to Montagnier. Salick brought Montagnier to New York by endowing a \$4.5-million chair at Queens College, where Montagnier will run the Center for Molecular and Cellular Biology.

Baltimore to leave MIT to lead Caltech

[WASHINGTON] David Baltimore, the biologist and Nobel prizewinner, is to leave the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to become president of the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena. Baltimore has spent more than ten years clearing his name in an epic case of alleged scientific misconduct by one of his laboratory staff, which in 1991 forced his resignation as president of Rockefeller University in New York. He will take over at Caltech in the autumn. He says that he will continue to head a six-month-old project at the National Institutes of Health to revive the government's AIDS vaccine research (see page 323).

Electrical fire at CERN holds up experiments

[LONDON] The two largest accelerators at the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland, have been brought to a halt following an electrical fire in a power supply last week. Burning insulation gave rise to hydrochloric acid fumes, requiring a major cleaning operation to prevent corrosion of the unit, which feeds power to the Super Proton Synchrotron.

Apart from its own research capabilities,

the synchrotron is used to feed particles to CERN's most powerful machine, the Large Electron-Positron collider, which was due to be started up following an upgrade of its maximum collision energy to 184 GeV. Research programmes at the synchrotron and collider are likely to be delayed by two to three weeks.

US technology advocate heads back home

[WASHINGTON] Mary Good, the under-secretary for technology at the US Commerce Department and an energetic advocate of technology programmes in the Clinton administration, will leave her post on 2 June and return home to Little Rock, Arkansas, a spokeswoman confirmed. William Daley, the new commerce secretary, is not expected to name Good's successor at least until next month.

Good was tipped to succeed John Gibbons as science adviser to President Bill Clinton, and her departure follows reports that that position is to be filled by John Deutch of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (see *Nature* 387, 112; 1997).

'Poached' eggs reveal dinosaur's identity

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[LONDON] These eggs, laid by the dinosaur *Oviraptor* about 80 million years ago in what is now Mongolia, form part of a touring exhibition 'Dinosaurs of the Gobi Desert' which is on show at the Natural History Museum in London until 31 August.

Back in the 1920s, Henry Fairfield Osborn of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) thought that humanity had evolved in Asia. He sent the adventurer Roy Chapman Andrews (the model for Indiana Jones) to the Gobi to find out. No human bones were forthcoming. Instead, Andrews made the first discoveries of dinosaur eggs, and assumed that they had been laid by the herbivore *Protoceratops*. Nearby skeletons of the rarer *Oviraptor* suggested thievery, hence its name. This story was turned on its head after the AMNH returned to Mongolia in the 1990s and found new specimens. Embryos preserved in supposedly *Protoceratops* eggs belonged to *Oviraptor* — a case of poacher turning gamekeeper.