

There is a correction associated with this article (see overleaf).

Borysiewicz to head UK medical council

The next head of the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) has been chosen, potentially bringing to a close a period of significant unrest within the organization. *Nature* has learned that the government's biomedical research organization will appoint Leszek Borysiewicz as successor to its current chief executive Colin Blakemore when he steps down at the end of this month.

Borysiewicz, who is currently deputy rector at Imperial College London, has a clinical-sciences background and is currently co-chair of the MRC's advisory group on stem-cell research. He will take charge of the MRC's £460-million (US\$933-million) annual research budget — perhaps more, if a government decision to increase the MRC's spending power is announced as expected later this year. "There will be a very substantial increase in the MRC's budget," says Blakemore. "I think the MRC will retain and expand its work in fundamental research, but will also expand elsewhere."

Borysiewicz will inherit an organization whose scientists are beset with doubts about their future. Last year's government-commissioned review of the MRC's goals by venture capitalist and former Wellcome Trust governor David Cooksey called for the council to pursue an agenda of 'translational research' — biomedical research more strongly focused on health benefits and the economic bottom line. The review voiced economists' and executives' fears that, despite the MRC's impressive track record of medical discoveries such as cancer drugs and monoclonal antibodies, it has failed in the past to maximize the clinical impact and reap the cash rewards its innovations deserve. But the new agenda has left MRC-funded scientists worried that basic research will be left out in the cold.

"I'm a lot more confident than I was six months ago that the MRC will not change its commitment to fundamental research across the whole spectrum, but in addition will be given the ability through funding to build more efficiently and carry forward things towards application," Blakemore told *Nature*.

Critics of the translational research agenda are anxious that the new appointee should not stifle basic research. "We need someone committed to making sure that 'blue sky' research funding is maintained," says Hilary Leivers, acting director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering in the UK.



Leszek Borysiewicz has a strong background in biomedical research.

"We need to make sure science is balanced." With a strong basic research background that has also yielded clinical benefits such as vaccines, Borysiewicz looks well placed to deliver on this balancing act.

The process of selecting a new chief executive has also suffered controversy, with doubts about the suitability of MRC chairman John Chisholm — appointed last year to lead the search for a new chief executive — to select the right candidate. In July, the Commons Science and Technology Committee said that it had "serious reservations as to whether Sir John

is the right person to guide the MRC executive through the coming period of change". Chisholm previously presided over the spin-out of the government's defence research agency to form a profit-making company called QinetiQ. At the MRC, he was appointed as a

non-executive chairman with no involvement in the council's decision on where to direct funds, but rumours have persisted that more than one well-qualified candidate has been discouraged from applying for the role of chief executive owing to fears of interference in such

decisions. Blakemore says he was not aware of candidates declining to apply, adding that "I am very confident that the next chief executive will be the leader of the MRC." Although Blakemore claims that he has no knowledge of who will replace him, he says: "I'm confident we will have a new chief executive in the post at the time of my departure." He adds that selecting a chief executive from a clinical background would potentially be a good strategic move.

"The most important thing is that the MRC should, and I think will, maintain its quality of judgement in supporting the very best biomedical research in the UK," Blakemore says.

Most observers of British science agree that the translational research agenda is a necessary and pragmatic new direction, providing that basic science does not suffer unduly. This was a widespread fear when Blakemore announced his intention to leave earlier this year. "We hope the agenda can be implemented without losing research quality," says Royal Society president Martin Rees. "The appointment of someone of high standing and professional reputation is crucial."

Borysiewicz, described by Rees as a "distinguished figure", has a research background focused on viruses and immunology. In 2001 he received a knighthood for his work on developing a range of vaccines, including the vaccine against human papilloma virus aimed at preventing cervical cancer. A popular figure among students and researchers at Imperial College, Borysiewicz is responsible for the college's overall scientific and academic direction. He has embraced applied research, particularly in establishing the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative, which was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Another influential British science policy job also looks to have been given to a candidate from Imperial College. John Beddington, a biological economist and political adviser on fisheries, is to be asked to become the British government's new chief science adviser, replacing David King when he finishes his eight-year tenure at the end of this year. The Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills is expected to make a formal announcement shortly.

With a background in environmental and fisheries research, Beddington is well-versed in the issues that look set to dominate government science policy during the next few years. "We at the Royal Society feel he's an excellent choice," says Rees. ■

Michael Hopkin

Correction

In the News story 'Borysiewicz to head UK medical council' (*Nature* **449**, 121; 2007), we misquoted Colin Blakemore, chief executive of the Medical Research Council (MRC), in a way that suggested he knew that there would be a substantial increase in the MRC's budget. Professor Blakemore said that he hoped there would be a substantial increase in the MRC's budget, and points out that he is not in a position to declare a definite funding increase. We apologize to Professor Blakemore.