

UK finally accepts human genetics commission

Concern over public reaction to the possible dangers of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) appears to have helped persuade the British government to set up a broad-ranging national commission on human genetics. The formal task of the new commission, which was announced in London last month by both Stephen Dorrell, the Secretary of State for Health, and Ian Lang, President of the Board of Trade. These men, to whom the commission will report, defined its task as maintaining an overview of developments in human genetics and its social and ethical implications.

However, government ministers (who are concerned that opposition to genetic engineering could threaten the growth of Britain's biotechnology industry) admit that one of the commission's key tasks will be to reassure the public that the potential threats of this technology are being adequately monitored.

The creation of a commission with broad powers was first proposed last year in a detailed report, prepared after a seven-month investigation, by the House of Commons Select Committee for

Science and Technology (see *Nature Medicine* 1, 855; 1995). The government's first reaction was to dismiss the suggestion as adding another layer of bureaucracy to the various specialist advisory panels already in place on different aspects of genetics, such as gene therapy and genetic testing.

However, in a highly unusual move, the all-party select committee indicated that it was not satisfied with this response, and demanded that the government should think again. In its report on the government's rejection of its initial proposal, the select committee repeated its earlier concern that none of the specialist committees was able to take a broad view of the potential problems raised by human genetics. It also linked its concern to the current controversy over BSE. Wide spread public unease about the cow disease, it said, "has shown the catastrophic results which may follow . . . a crisis of confidence

in regulation, and the science on which it is based."

In response to this second report, the government has now announced that it is indeed planning to set up a Human Genetic Advisory Commission, and that the responsibilities of this panel will be not merely to take a "trans-departmental" view of developments in human genetics — covering issues relating to public health, insurance, patents and employment — but also "to foster public confidence in the new science."

Ian Taylor, the junior minister responsible for science, rejects the claim that the government has done a U-turn. He says that the government rejected as too rigid the committee's initial proposal for a statutory body, with regulatory responsibilities enshrined in legislation. "I find the idea of an advisory commission much more attractive," he says.

David Dickson
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"I find the idea of an advisory commission much more attractive."

— Ian Taylor

MRC makes move to reap what it sows

The United Kingdom's Medical Research Council (MRC) says it is planning a "seed investment fund" to start up biotechnology companies based on MRC research. The fund, which will operate as a separate company but still be MRC-owned, hopes to raise US\$40 million from private investors, enough money to set up ten biotechnology companies over the next five years.

David Owen, MRC's Director of Industrial Collaboration, said the fund would ensure that the US\$437 million a year of public money distributed to academic researchers is harnessed to improved health care. "But in doing this we must not distort the science," says Owen. "We are not putting up a sign saying 'MRC Labs, Ltd.,' and the MRC's role in making new, fundamental discoveries will not change."

The establishment of the seed fund is the latest effort in MRC's campaign to derive more commercial benefit from the research it supports. Earlier this year, MRC unveiled plans to create a collaborative center in Edinburgh, Scotland, to work with the pharmaceutical industry to develop applications of MRC technology. MRC officials hope the Edinburgh center will mirror the success a similar center on the site of the MRC's research laboratory in Mill Hill, London. Set up in 1987, the Mill Hill center is now

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a self-financing unit with 50 staff. It has also been the first home of several companies based on MRC research, including Cambridge Antibody Technology, Therexsys, Ltd. (a gene therapy company now based in Keele, Staffordshire) and Prolifix, Ltd., a company specializing in cell-cycle research that plans to move out of Mill Hill soon.

MRC has learned the hard way the importance of exploiting the commercial possibilities of its research. The memory of its failure to patent the discovery of monoclonal antibodies — now one of the technologies at the heart of the biotechnology revolution — still rankles.

Although there is no shortage of technology that could be exploited for commercial gain, the limiting factor is venture capital, according to Owen. Two new MRC companies, Ribotargets, Ltd., which plans to develop anti-infective drugs based on RNA, and Cambridge Genetics, which specializes in retroviral technology, still lack sufficient financing. However, because venture financing is a problem for European start-ups in general, Owen says that once MRC companies are finally established, they tend to attract technology from universities and research institutes across Europe.

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