

New knowledge and opportunities, but no new money

Australia's 30,000 postgraduate students will gain control of their research grants and be able to transfer the funds to universities of their choosing after the first year, according to proposals outlined in a government Green Paper on tertiary education released last month.

The discussion document, entitled 'New Knowledge, New Opportunities,' also proposes linking infrastructure funds more closely to research grants; pushes universities to specialize rather than run courses across the board; and will reward institutions who develop ties with industry.

Although not everyone is happy with the proposals to overhaul the AUS\$1.1 billion (US\$ 730 million) research funding system—largely because the Green Paper does not recommend new money to instigate the changes—it has been embraced by biomedical scientists.

This is because much of the country's biomedical research is conducted outside the university system in university-affiliated medical research institutes, and changes to the grant system will bring more money into institutes. "At present, a university receives an amount of infrastructure funding from federal funds based on a complex formula," explains John Shine, director of the Garvan Institute of Medical Research and president of the Association of Australian of Medical Research Institutes, "and most medical research institutes don't receive any infrastructure money from that grant; but the proposals should alter that."

Shine points to the similarities between the Green Paper and the Wills review (*Nature Med.* 5, 598; 1999): both advocate commercialization of research and re-structuring of the national grant-giving body. But the Wills review articulated strongly that substantial funds must be invested in basic research as the base for new strategic directions, which led to a doubling of medical research grants. The Green Paper is silent on this point. "So it's quite a different perspective that you have on this Green Paper as to whether you come from medical or non-medical research," says Shine.

KAREN BIRMINGHAM, LONDON

World Conference on Science recognizes science–health link

The governments of developed and developing nations have been urged to introduce research programs to reduce the variation in health among their communities. The proposal is contained in two documents arising from the World Conference on Science, organized jointly by the United Nations Educational and Science Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council for Science (Budapest, June 26th–July 1st). They aim to establish the principles for a "new social contract" between science and society.

The explicit reference in both documents—the "Declaration on Science and the Use of Scientific Knowledge," and the "Science Agenda: Framework for Action"—to the need to promote science in the interests of public health was introduced at the suggestion of the British government. Earlier drafts had made virtually no mention of the potential contribution of science to meeting health problems.

The final version of the "Declaration"

document now states that governments and scientists "should address the complex problems of poor health and the increasing inequalities in health across different countries and between communities within the same country."

The "Framework" document advocates the introduction of "regional research programs aimed at reducing variations in health among communities, such as collecting good epidemiological and other statistical data."

The final documents also gave explicit recognition to the potential value of "traditional forms of learning and knowledge," as well as emphasizing that its commercialization should be "properly rewarded." The latter reflects concerns at the way foreign pharmaceutical companies have exploited traditional herbal medicines and incorporated these into new products, often without any payment to the communities that originally developed them.

DAVID DICKSON, BUDAPEST

Access to presidential DNA denied

Equipped with ever-improving tools for DNA analysis, researchers are seeking out archived bone fragments and bloodstains that could help answer medical questions about long-dead historical figures. However, the ability to peer into the chromosomes of the past raises legal and ethical issues: Who should control access to parts of President Lincoln's skull? So what if Grant's tongue tumor tests positive for a p53 mutation? And, when does testing justify damaging a historical relic?

Last month, the Chicago Historical Society decided not to release a blood-stained cape that Mary Todd Lincoln may have been wearing the night her husband was shot. The society concluded that the information that DNA tests would yield, such as whether Lincoln suffered Marfan's syndrome, doesn't justify damaging the fabric.

Victor McKusick, the Johns Hopkins University pioneer of medical genetics, who was among the first to link the cardiovascular and skeletal symptoms of Marfan's syndrome with a single defective gene (*Nature Med.* 3, 1065; 1997), is unperturbed. He thinks the cape is a fake and has long sought access to pieces of Lincoln's skull held by the US Museum of

Health and Science.

The bone analysis would at least answer an academic debate since McKusick's Hopkins colleague, Marfan's specialist Hal Dietz, thinks it unlikely that Lincoln had the Marfan's syndrome, which often gives rise to the long limbs and fingers that Lincoln was known for.

Some ethicists oppose the tests on the grounds they offer little to science or history. Others, like Philip Reilly—a lawyer, geneticist and director of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center near Boston—thinks Lincoln would have endorsed the screening because, if it proves positive for Marfan's, it would boost the morale of a disadvantaged group by allowing them to identify with an American hero.

The museum has, however, given permission to Terry Sharrer, a curator at the National Museum of American History in Washington DC, to conduct a preliminary inspection of the tumor that is thought to have killed President Ulysses S. Grant. Sharrer also wants to run genetic tests on the tissue, but a museum spokeswoman says this will not be allowed because it may damage the specimen.

TINKER READY, BOSTON



Bone fragments from Lincoln's skull.