

Straight talk from... Colin Blakemore

After four years at the helm of Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC), which governs a £530-million research budget, Colin Blakemore is stepping down. As *Nature Medicine* went to press, a successor had not been formally announced. Here Blakemore talks about his tenure at the agency, the future of British medical research and the community's fears over the council's new 'translational' agenda, proposed by the government's 2006 Cooksey Review, which recommends shifting the focus to more applied research.

What do you see as your main achievements during your tenure?

Shortly after I came in, I argued that there was both a moral obligation and a scientific opportunity to find new ways of exploiting discovery more effectively. If we had not made that commitment, and hadn't done a lot of thinking about where we can best contribute to translational research, then I think the MRC would be in a much more difficult position than it is now.

Funding for universities has virtually tripled during my time at the MRC. Although our award rate is still low (about 20%) compared with those of most other British research councils, it's considerably better than it was four years ago, despite the fact that the number of grant applications to the MRC has just about quadrupled in some areas. Something that I set as a target, and which seems to have been achieved, is that all the research boards are now funding all of the applications that they rate as being internationally competitive. When I came in, some boards were funding less than 50% of such applications, which was just an unacceptable situation.

Why has there been so much mistrust of the Cooksey review?

The most important thing to say is that the MRC should—and I think will—maintain the quality of its judgement in supporting the very best of biomedical research in the UK. The fear that's been in the air over the past year has been about whether funding might shift toward applied research at the expense of the kind of fundamental research that's been done so brilliantly in the past.

I wouldn't say everything's certain, because there's an awful lot to be worked out in detail, but I'm a lot more confident than I was six months ago that the MRC will retain its full commitment to fundamental research. Cooksey says very clearly that the funding for the underpinning basic research must be sustained, and we are all hoping, of course, that this means genuinely sustained.

How much can researchers expect the MRC to change?

I don't anticipate an abrupt change—and you can see the precedent for all the likely changes in the MRC's strategic thinking over the past four years. Actually, the MRC has always done a much better job of integrating nonclinical and clinical research than most of the funding agencies in the world. I know from visiting other places that we are the envy of the world in our capacity to cover the whole spectrum of medical research. Others are just now thinking about how to put together clinical and basic research and [are] finding it very hard—well, the MRC's been doing that since 1913.

Why did you decide to leave now, and what are your career plans?

The next few years will see new challenges and opportunities for the MRC—and that means that it will be good to have a different viewpoint, someone else with new ideas. There's never an ideal time to leave a job, but from my own point of view, leaving now is good for my future. I'm 63, so it would have been difficult to start something else really challenging if I had spent two or three more years at the MRC.

I'll be doing a varied portfolio of different jobs. I'm going back to a professorship at the University of Oxford, and I'm also taking an appointment at Warwick as a professor of neuroscience, which will include the possibility of establishing some kind of collaboration in Singapore,

where I shall also hold an appointment, helping to increase activity in neuroscience.

How do you interpret criticism that John Chisholm, who was appointed to preside over the search for your successor, is too hands-on?

You have to understand how nervous the research community is at present about possible threats to the MRC. Almost anything that happens—my leaving, the commitment to translation, a new chairman—provokes all kinds of suspicions and interpretations. John Chisholm is a distinguished engineer with a reputation for robust commercial management. So some people were inclined to think that the MRC was going to be driven in a much more applied, goal-oriented direction. But you have to see some of this reaction as an expression of a more general concern about the future of the MRC.

I'm very confident that the next chief executive of the MRC will be strongly supported by John Chisholm. John will be strongly involved in helping the MRC to implement its plans, but I don't think he will try to drive the scientific thinking of the MRC.

"We are the envy of the world."



One of the main controversies of your tenure was the proposal to move the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) to central London from its suburban site at Mill Hill.

NIMR is a wonderful place to work and it's a well-organized and supportive community doing excellent research. But it's geographically isolated and lacks close association with the wide range of other disciplines, including clinical science, which will be essential for biomedical research in the coming decades. I was disappointed with the strength of opposition at the institute to the plans for a move. They seemed not to acknowledge fully the changing, broader agenda for medical research, or the fact that the institute is entirely owned by, and responsible to, the MRC. It's not an independent entity that just has the right to draw its £35 million a year and make its own decisions.

The bottom line is, it must be the Council of the MRC that determines what happens to its investments and what is best for the MRC as a whole. It is now widely known that we are exploring the possibility of incorporating our plans for NIMR into a much larger development, with several other partners, on another site [at Somers Town in central London]. I really hope that this will demonstrate to the staff of the institute that the MRC has recognized their concerns and that the new plans will provide an exciting conclusion to what has been a very difficult process.

What's your farewell message to British researchers?

The major message would be one of reassurance. The rumors and worries at least show that the community values the MRC and is very concerned about its future. I think they can be confident that its values will be preserved through this period of change and that it will emerge strengthened.

Michael Hopkin, London