

Communication breakdown

The UK Medical Research Council seems to have alienated a sizeable minority of the researchers that it supports. Building bridges with these disaffected individuals must be a top priority for the agency's next chief executive.

This should have been a golden year for Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC). Half a century ago, its scientists changed the face of biology. And with celebrations of the 50th anniversary of discovery of the structure of DNA now reaching a crescendo, the MRC is justified in claiming its share of the credit.

For the MRC's leaders, however, the double-helix celebrations have been muted somewhat by an outburst of criticism and controversy. Last month a sharply worded report from the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee accused the council of putting too much of its money in big projects, leaving little to fund individual grants for university-based researchers (see *Nature* 422, 461; 2003). Now, scientists at its largest research centre, the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) at Mill Hill in north London, are up in arms about a draft strategic document that proposes closing the existing site, and reconstituting the institute in Cambridge.

The document, which was posted for consultation on the MRC's website (www.mrc.ac.uk) on 4 April, comes from an MRC subcommittee that was asked to develop a strategy for the council's major capital investments over the next 10–15 years. It argues that the proposed relocation will be beneficial, allowing the NIMR to operate side-by-side with the jewel in the MRC's crown, its Laboratory of Molecular Biology, which should by then be installed in a new building. The subcommittee also suggests that the translation of fundamental research into clinical advances will be facilitated by housing the NIMR in close proximity to Addenbrooke's Hospital, on the same site.

These arguments may have merit, but NIMR staff fear an ulterior motive, viewing the report as an attempt to redistribute money to the university researchers whose plight was highlighted in the Science and Technology Committee's report. The draft strategy document talks of making savings on the NIMR's current running costs, and suggests that the 'new' NIMR will be rather smaller than its current incarnation at Mill Hill. The subcommittee that drafted the report,

NIMR staff note, is dominated by the chairs of the MRC's research boards, who are based at universities.

For the MRC, tension between university-based researchers and the staff in its institutes and units is nothing new. But the current controversy comes in stark contrast to the glowing reports that the MRC received ten years ago, when the government of the day released a blueprint for the organization of British science that is still in place today. Other research councils were reorganized and reconstituted, but the MRC was left alone.

So what went wrong? Not that much, say some observers. The MRC retains an international reputation for fostering scientific excellence, and many researchers still regard it as fundamentally well run. Others, however, suggest that the MRC has begun to lose its way under its current chief executive, George Radda. They complain about a growing distance between the council's leaders and its scientific constituency, and about a lack of consultation over major funding decisions.

Talk to staff at the NIMR, and these complaints are greatly magnified. They feel undermined by rumours of the closure of Mill Hill that have been circulating for some time. The institute's research in genetics, developmental biology, neuroscience, infectious diseases and structural biology was given excellent ratings in the last external review in 2000, but NIMR staff have little trust in the objectivity of forthcoming reviews of the institute's individual research divisions — which are likely to be led by the same MRC board chairs who drafted the current consultation document.

This simmering discontent will land squarely in the lap of the next chief executive of the MRC, who will replace Radda when he steps down in September. Whoever is selected to lead the MRC forward should focus on improving communication with Britain's medical-research community and building its trust. Difficult choices, such as deciding the future of the NIMR, will always have to be made — the important thing is that they are seen to have been made fairly. ■

There are two sides to biodefence

A mystery epidemic of pneumonia serves as a timely reminder that Mother Nature is the ultimate bioterrorist.

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which was responsible for about a hundred deaths by the time *Nature* went to press, was already roaming the globe by airliner by the time medical science realized that it was dealing with something new.

Asked at a press conference whether SARS serves as a fire drill for a bioterrorist attack, James Hughes, director of the National Center for Infectious Diseases at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, agreed that it does. But he pointed out that it also serves as a fire drill for another grim possibility: the next influenza pandemic.

The parallels are clear. The leading theory is that SARS is caused by a virus that jumped from animals to humans (see page 547), much like new strains of flu. And the mortality rate is similar: around 3% for SARS, compared with about 2.5% for the Spanish flu of 1918.

Thankfully, today we are better equipped to respond to the threat. The genome sequence of the prime suspect, a new strain of coronavirus, will become available any day now. This should help to reveal where the virus came from, suggest reasons for its lethality, and speed the development of rapid tests for its presence.

The genomic information would be nearly useless, however, were it not for the basic research into coronavirus biology carried out since this family of viruses was first found to infect humans in the 1960s. In the United States, vast sums of money are now being ploughed into biodefence, and nearly \$300 million of the 2003 allocation is designated for basic research, including genomics. SARS reminds us of the value of ensuring that this research is 'dual use' — relevant to fighting not just bioterrorism, but also naturally emerging diseases, which may ultimately prove more dangerous. ■