



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Government Response
to the Committee's
Second Report, Session
2003–04, Chief
Executive of the
Medical Research
Council: Introductory
Hearing**

Fifth Special Report of Session 2003–04

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The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of Science and Technology and its associated public bodies

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Chris Shaw (Clerk), Emily Commander (Second Clerk), Alun Roberts (Committee Specialist), Hayaatun Sillem (Committee Specialist), Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant), Robert Long (Senior Office Clerk), and Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary)

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Fifth Special Report

On 29 January the Science and Technology Committee published its Second Report of Session 2003–04, Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council: Introductory Hearing. On 25 May 2004 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contains a response to the Report. The memorandum is published without comment as an appendix to this report.

Appendix

Introduction

As indicated in responses to previous reports from the Committee on the work of the Research Councils, the Government welcomes the interest of the Committee in the work of the Research Councils and is happy to offer any assistance as may be required.

List of Recommendations and Government Responses

1. If it is the case that MRC researchers are contractually unable to comment on aspects of MRC policy in public, we urge Professor Blakemore to signal publicly that any such breaches of contract will not result in disciplinary procedures and to remove the offending clause from future contracts. (Paragraph 6)

MRC employees are not contractually prevented from commenting on aspects of MRC policy in public, provided they do so in accordance with the common law requirements and duty of good faith applicable to all employment relationships, and also that they are clear when they are commenting whether they do so on behalf of Council or on a personal basis.

MRC expects that its employees will use internal mechanisms for feeding into (and if necessary, criticising) MRC policies. And then if they wish to comment in public, the provisions in the paragraph above apply. MRC also expects that its employees will actively engage in wider stakeholder debates, again subject to the provisions above

MRC has been reviewing its approaches to the funding and review of research, in particular through a series of roadshows around the country. MRC staff were invited to these and were encouraged to make their views known.

2. We look forward to an invigorated public debate on animal experimentation. Opinion polls suggest that the public takes a pragmatic view but the nervousness of the scientific community about engaging in debate has allowed pressure groups to dictate the public agenda. (Paragraph 7)

The government agrees that public debate is important, as is the need to ensure that the general public has information on the use of animals in scientific procedures and has access to accurate data. In November 2002 a Cross Government, long-term communications strategy was agreed which aims to put across in a co-ordinated manner

the facts on regulation of animals in scientific procedures and on promotion of research into non-animal alternatives with the aim of:

- increasing the knowledge of the scope and strict enforcement of the regulations that safeguard all animals used in scientific procedures;
- improving the understanding and appreciation of the ongoing work and funding by Government to develop techniques to Refine, Reduce and Replace the use of animals in scientific research; and
- countering misleading propaganda by animal rights extremists, where such propaganda relates to Government activities.

These messages will be closely related to the benefits of medical progress and to the need to research, develop and test new medicines and therapies to ensure that they are safe for humans, animals and the environment.

We decided against a short term advertising campaign; rather our strategy is for a long-term (at least 3 years) programme to increase public knowledge through addressing key influential audiences, setting out objectively core messages through speeches, seminars and written material. This is being implemented.

The aims of our strategy are similar to those of the Coalition for Medical Progress. DTI and other Government Departments are working closely with the CMP to ensure a unified message is relayed to the media and the public as a whole.

3. Animal Experimentation is highly regulated by Government and scientists conduct this research with the tacit approval of Parliament. A Scientist who is bold enough to articulate publicly, and in Professor Blakemore's case so eloquently, why this should be the case should not be refused an honour for taking such a stance. The leaked memorandum undermines the Government's attempts to promote scientists' engagement in public debate. We welcome Lord Sainsbury's clear & unequivocal support for Professor Blakemore's position. (Paragraph 9)

The Government notes these comments.

4. We understand Professor Blakemore's desire to defend the reputation of the MRC but he should not do this by misrepresenting our views and conclusions. He should focus his energies on reforming the culture within an organisation, which seemed unwilling or unable to provide accurate information to Parliament. (Paragraph 10)

The MRC regrets the fact that it provided some inaccurate information to the Select Committee during its review of the work of the MRC, and recognises the importance of providing accurate information to Parliament, and to the public more widely. It certainly did not intend deliberately to provide inaccurate information. MRC is currently introducing a new Information System which should in future make it easier to provide accurate and consistent information more quickly.

5. Professor Blakemore is fortunate in that he carries much good will with him into his new position. This provides him with tremendous opportunities for positive reform

and we have confidence that he has the ability to deliver. His media skills will enable him to heighten the profile of the MRC & articulate the benefits of medical research. We too welcome his appointment and are pleased that he did not carry out his threat to resign following the controversy surrounding his exclusion from the 2003 New Year's Honours List. We look forward to a productive relationship in the future. (Paragraph 11)

The Government welcomes these comments.

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