



The Save British Science Society

SUPPORTING SCIENCE & THE APPLICATIONS OF SCIENCE

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Individuality is important

SBS submission to the House of Commons Science & Technology's call for evidence in advance of its session of scrutiny of the Medical Research Council

1. SBS is pleased to submit this response to the Committee's Inquiry into the Medical Research Council. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

2. The Medical Research Council (MRC) has a long tradition of funding the most outstanding research, and one mark of its success is the number of Nobel Prizes that have been won by researchers at the MRC's Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge. SBS therefore starts from the position that it is broadly supportive of the MRC's policies and activities.

3. Our principal concern, however, relates to the deliberate shift away from allowing individual researchers to apply for project grants, for ideas that do not form part of the agenda of a larger conglomerate or centre.

4. SBS appreciates that science, especially medical science, has changed dramatically in recent years, and that initiatives such as the Human Genome Project inevitably mean that an increasing proportion of resources will be directed toward larger teams and groups.

5. Moreover, we agree with the MRC that it is important to "encourage emerging groups and centres...through offering development grants that help new groups establish Co-operative Group or Centre status, strategic grants in priority areas for development, and career establishment research grants for newly appointed academics."¹

6. However, not all good ideas come from newly appointed academics, not all breakthroughs come in what were previously perceived as

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priority areas, and not all innovative science is done by co-operative groups.

7. SBS believes that there is no good reason to abolish individual project grants altogether. Other Research Councils, such as the Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council, have many of the same pressures as the MRC. Advances in structural biology and climate change research mean that larger co-operatives, teams, groups and centres are inevitable, but the process of their creation has not led to the abolition of individual grants in these and other areas for which these Councils have responsibility.

8. The MRC currently has an annual budget of £362 million for research and development, up 14% in real terms since 1997.ⁱⁱ Everyone expects that it will share in the 10% annual real-terms increases that its parent body, the Office of Science & Technology, will be receiving over the next three years.ⁱⁱⁱ

9. It is inconceivable that the MRC could argue that there is not enough money to operate a modest responsive-mode grant scheme, to allow individuals or small teams with innovative ideas to obtain sufficient funding to conduct modest experiments over a few years, in order to establish genuinely new and exciting lines of research.

November, 2002

ⁱ Quoted from a letter from the Chief Executive of the MRC to the Director of SBS, dated 20 November 2002.

ⁱⁱ *Forward Look 2001: Government-funded science, engineering & technology*, Office of Science & Technology/Department of Trade & Industry, 2001 [Cm 5338].

ⁱⁱⁱ *Opportunity and Security for All: investing in an enterprising, fairer Britain, New public spending plans 2003-2006*, H M Treasury, 2002 [Cm 5570].