

Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Hard Times for MRC

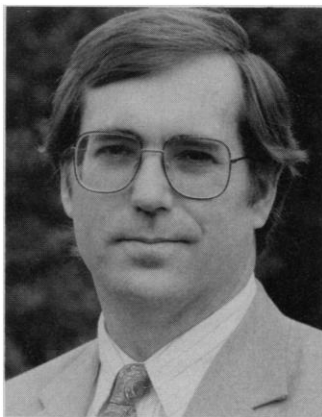
Researchers in the United States do a lot of complaining about shortages of funds. But their plight isn't nearly as tough as that of workers at Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC). The MRC, perhaps the leading sponsor of biomedical research in the United Kingdom, recently closed three of its units. Now the organization has canceled all new funding for at least 6 months because of a projected deficit. The upshot: no new research support, no hiring, and no new equipment.

MRC director Dai Rees blamed a recent staff pay increase—of more than 9% instead of the expected 8%—for the MRC's projected shortfall of £3.5 million in the current fiscal year. Although the deficit is less than 2% of the current budget of £185.7 million, Rees said the council is not prepared to carry it forward.

The funding freeze comes at a time when things are already precarious at the MRC. Directors of MRC units around the country say morale is very low. The morale of senior staff wasn't improved by a ban recently imposed that forbids them from speaking out on MRC policy. And outside critics, charging that "the MRC has a major financial problem which it has hushed up until now," are calling for an independent investigation of the council's financial management.

NAS Agriculture Expert Sacked

Charles Benbrook, a hard-charging critic of agribusiness who for 7 years has headed the Board on Agriculture at the National Academy of Sciences, is leaving his job. According to several sources, he was handed his walking papers by academy president Frank Press and given



Charles Benbrook

less than a month to clear out.

Press announced the decision in a memo to employees on 9 November. It expresses regret at Benbrook's "resignation," noting that he "helped establish the Board on Agriculture as a respected, influential adviser to the government" and that he broadened its financial base with grants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The memo ends: "We shall miss his dedication and wish him well."

Some say Benbrook was the victim of inside politics. "How often does a person in a senior position, with three kids, just quit, with no job and no plans?"

asks Ken Cook, a friend of Benbrook's and vice president for policy at the Center for Resource Economics. Cook says Benbrook was dismissed in response to an accumulating list of complaints from leaders in the chemical industry and the Department of Agriculture. Benbrook directed publication of a highly critical report on federal pesticide regulation in 1987 and a positive review of "alternative agriculture" methods in 1989.

Benbrook declined to comment, except to say that he was pleased with the board's accomplishments during his time there. He has not yet found a new position. The academy, for its part, denied there is any link between Benbrook's departure and his stormy relations with the agribusiness world.

Brown Likely to Head House Space Panel

One key shift in policy circles brought about by the congressional elections will be a change of leadership for the House subcommittee on space science and

applications. George Brown, Jr. (D-CA), an old hand in science affairs in Washington, appears likely to be the next chairman, replacing Bill Nelson (D-FL), who relinquished his seat to run (unsuccessfully) for the gubernatorial nomination.

Except for a 2-year gap in the 1970s, Brown has represented Southern California's 36th district, including the town of Riverside, since 1973. Agriculture and aerospace are two of his constituents' main concerns. Six years ago, Brown sought the space committee chairmanship, but lost to Nelson, say Capitol Hill staffers, because he did not begin his vote-gathering campaign early enough. This time around may be different. Brown aides say he began nailing down support last summer and now has more than enough votes to become chairman.

A long-time supporter of civilian space programs, Brown has also been sharply critical of some military weapons programs. In this vein, he may be best known as the leader of efforts to prevent the Pentagon from developing and deploying antisatellite systems.

Antidrug Ads for Dope Fiends

Two decades of research into characteristics shared by heavy drug users is leading to more effective appeals aimed at getting them to seek help. University of Delaware psychologist Marvin Zuckerman has found that chronic drug abusers tend to share personality traits that he has labeled "sensation-seeking." As Zuckerman has defined it, sensation-seeking—which includes not only a taste for novelty and risk but a lack of inhibition and a low boredom threshold—is a trait with apparently strong biological determinants.

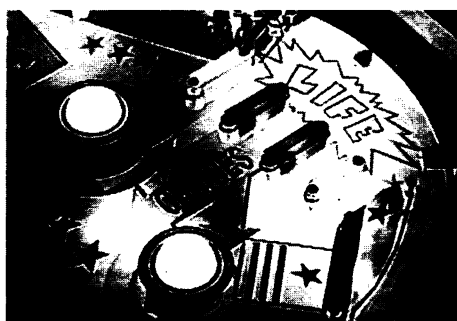
Now, researchers at the University of Kentucky are using Zuckerman's test, the Sensation-Seeking Scale, to design anti-drug ads for TV. Such campaigns often tend to be geared to potential or casual users (see *Science*, 9 November, p. 739). But that audience is the easiest one to influence, says Lewis Donohew of the

University of Kentucky's Center for Prevention Research. The Kentucky project, which recently received \$1.5 million from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, is aimed at the tough ones—the high sensation-seekers.

Donohew says laboratory and field tests have shown that Zuckerman's scale reliably predicts which kinds of ads the "highs" are attracted to: In sharp contrast to the "lows," they like ads backed with hard rock music that portray fast and high-

risk activities such as white-water rafting. Researchers found a "significant difference between the highs and lows" in response to such ads as measured by willingness to call a drug hotline, says Donohew.

Ads created by the Kentucky team will be tested in a 6-month county-wide media campaign to be conducted in 1992.



Ad For Risk Seekers. A frame from a "High Sensation Value" public service announcement, cast as a pinball game with scenes from thrill-packed activities.