RUSSIA

Reformer Named Science Minister

Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his young premier didn't have to look far to find their new science minister: He was the previous chief's boss. Last week Yeltsin and Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko announced that Vladimir Bulgak, a deputy prime minister in the previous Cabinet, will head the science ministry. Although Bulgak may be primed to push overdue changes to Russia's frayed scientific establishment, some observers worry that basic research could be the ultimate loser in any overhaul.

A communications engineer by training, Bulgak last year suggested, among other things, limiting Russian research to a handful of important areas and closing or merging some of the Russian Academy of Sciences' (RAS's) roughly 350 institutes. But an anxiously awaited blueprint for Russian science reform, drafted by the science ministry under Bulgak's guidance and released last October, offered few concrete steps (*Science*, 14 November 1997, p. 1220).

Observers say it's unclear how much power Bulgak will have to carry out major reforms. Although his new role amounts to a demotion, Bulgak will no longer be counterbalanced by ousted Science Minister Vladimir Fortov, a physicist who fought for RAS's interests. Bulgak could not be reached for comment.

Other experts worry about the fate of basic research under Bulgak. Last year, the state science budget was slashed 55%, to $2.2 billion, under a government-wide effort to close a gaping deficit. The 1998 budget has been kept to that austere level, which Bulgak has called "the optimum" for Russian science. Bulgak's enthusiasm for the belt tightening, as well as his calls for greater commercialization of research findings and for getting science programs to pay for themselves, worry some observers. His tenure, says one, "could be disastrous for fundamental science."

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Bottom line. Bulgak wants science to pay dividends.

Applied science programs, particularly the international space station, will get most of his early attention. Even with strong government support, sluggish payments for work on the station are likely to delay until this fall the first module's launch. "This is an issue that [Bulgak] has got to face and deal with," says policy analyst Charles Vick of the Federation of American Scientists. Indeed, that's one of many crumbling edifices that need shoring up in a bleak scientific landscape.

–Richard Stone

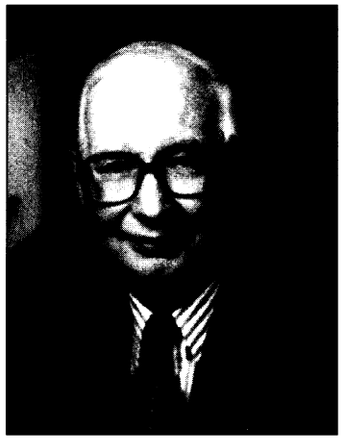
With reporting by Vladimir Pokrovsky, a writer based in Moscow.

CANADA

Plan Would Link, Bolster Health Research

OTTAWA—Canadian health officials are seriously considering a plan that could double federal spending on university-based medical research next year by creating a national framework that would supplement the current bottoms-up approach to funding research. Such a system would give the ruling Liberal government a way to invest in health care without stepping on the jurisdictional toes of the provinces and to inject $375 million a year into a biomedical and health research community now strapped for cash.

The architect of the plan is Henry Friesen, president of the Medical Research Council (MRC), whose $187 million annual budget represents the bulk of federal funding for academic health research. Last week Friesen laid out the idea in embryonic form at the annual meeting here of the Association of Canadian Medical Colleges (ACMC) and the Association of Canadian Teaching Hospitals. He has already won the tacit endorsement of Health Minister Alan Rock, who in March invited the council "to pursue exploration of the idea." Rock also agreed to host a meeting in November aimed at uniting the community behind one plan, putting the weight of his office behind the idea.



"A 21st century Canadian Institutes of Health Research [would create] a national effort for innovation in health."
—Henry Friesen

Among the ideas now under discussion is one to create a dozen or so virtual institutes, grouped by field or disease, that would operate like the extramural component of the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). Unlike NIH, however, there would be no intramural program and no central campus. Although the researchers would be hired by existing organizations—medical schools, teaching hospitals, research institutions, and the like—the MRC might provide the necessary administrative and financial support. In addition, the virtual institutes would be free to support computer networks, databases, and other elements of a research effort now outside the scope of MRC operating grants.

Friesen says the new entity, which he calls a "21st century Canadian Institutes of Health Research," could have an impact on the country similar to that of the railroad in the 19th century, "stretching from coast to coast and addressing what's most important to Canadians." Its creation, he adds, would transform Canada's 16 major academic health sciences centers, 50 teaching hospitals, 65 affiliated research institutes, and peripheral health care facilities and agencies "into a national effort for innovation in health."

The governing Liberals are openly shopping for initiatives to demonstrate a federal commitment to health care on par with the recent $1.75 billion millennium scholarship fund for students (*Science*, 6 March, p. 1445) and the $600 million research infrastructure program for universities (*Science*, 28 February 1997, p. 1256). Those two initiatives are meant to showcase Ottawa's dedication to postsecondary education while avoiding direct meddling in areas viewed as the exclusive domain of the provinces.

Many academics see Friesen's proposal as a similar "millennium investment" in health care. "There is probably a one-time opportunity to get a significant federal investment in health, through health research," notes ACMC Executive Director David Hawkins. "And the window is fairly tight."

Although such details as the governance,