

lion in grants will fund research on inflammatory and environment-related diseases.

The third main category of funding—amounting to about \$32 million—is proteomics and bioinformatics research, which will fund work at several university and nonuniversity institutes.

Although many scientists welcomed the initiative, some worry that its 3-year time frame—with no clear guarantee of long-term research money—might limit its impact. Germany's main opposition party, the Christian Democrats, has called for even more funding for functional genomics research, as has the nation's main basic research granting agency, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

—ROBERT KOENIG

## GERMANY

### Old Guard Battles Academic Reforms

**BERN**—The war of words over efforts to reform Germany's hierarchical university system ratcheted up a level last week. The latest salvo is a 4-page advertisement in the nation's top newspaper, signed by 3759 professors, that criticizes the research ministry's plans to create "junior professors," phase out the Habilitation requirement—a kind of extended postdoc needed to secure academic tenure—and change some work rules that favor professors.

Under the headline "Protect Universities From the Departure of Their Top Talent," the ad urges the German Parliament to reject the proposed reforms. It says they would degrade the quality of professorships under the guise of promoting more independence for younger researchers. Hartmut Schiedermair, a law professor at the University of Cologne, warns that presenting the reforms as "cost neutral" is misleading and that the likely result will be pay cuts that will drive many new professors into industry or abroad. Schiedermair is also president of the main organization of German university professors, the Deutscher Hochschulverband (DHV), which placed the ad in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper. The signatories represent nearly 12% of the country's 32,000 professors.

The chief target of the DHV's wrath is research minister Edelgard Bulmahn, who has championed the reform package. A ministry spokesperson calls the campaign "unserious and full of errors." For example, she rejects the DHV's assertion that salaries for new professors would fall substantially under the new system. Although it sets a minimum salary, she says, the best professors would likely receive significant pay hikes based on merit.

Supporters of the reforms include the HRK German conference of university rectors and presidents and Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, president of the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) basic research granting agency, who says that the professors' letter is "unfortunate if not counterproductive." They and others argue that the best way to promote the independence of young scientists is to create "junior professorships"—roughly equivalent to U.S.-style assistant professor slots—and to phase out the post-Ph.D. Habilitation requirement, which puts young researchers under the thumb of senior professors for years. The reforms were supported last year by a high-level commission (*Science*, 21 April 2000, p. 413) and more recently by a petition signed by 646 German scientists working abroad.

The lobbying from all sides is converging on Germany's Parliament, which appears likely to make its decision later this year. With one of Germany's leading newspapers describing the fight as "The Bulls Against Bulmahn," the debate promises to be one of the nation's liveliest in years. Many scientists also consider it to be one of the most important to the future of German research.

—ROBERT KOENIG

## JAPAN

### Court Backs Lab's Safety Practices

**TOKYO**—A Japanese court has rejected claims by a citizens' group that a major biomedical research facility poses a safety threat to downtown Tokyo. But the plaintiffs aren't finished: They hope that the government's poor record on several health and safety issues will fuel a nationwide campaign against other research facilities.

The suit was brought by some 200 people who live or work near Japan's National Institute of Infectious Diseases (NIID) in central Tokyo. A part of the Ministry of

Health, Labor, and Welfare, the NIID is the government's main facility for studying and tracking infectious diseases, including such deadly pathogens as dengue virus and hantavirus. The suit was originally filed in 1989, 3 years before NIID's predecessor moved to the present site. The plaintiffs enlisted European biosafety experts, who detailed numerous violations of World Health Organization (WHO) biosafety standards. The NIID marshaled its own outside experts, who found no problems (*Science*, 9 October 1998, p. 213).

Last week the Tokyo District Court sided with the NIID, finding "no illegality" in the facility's operating practices. The court said that the WHO recommendations have no standing under Japanese law and that the plaintiffs' claims lacked supporting evidence and were based only on a "vague fear of the unfamiliar."

"It is surprising that the court found not a single safety violation," says the plaintiffs' lawyer, Syuichi Shimada. The decision, he adds, appears to endorse an institution's right to both set safety standards and then decide whether those standards are being met. NIID officials failed to respond to requests for comment.

Although most in the scientific community believe that the neighbors' fears are overblown, many feel that the NIID and the Health Ministry mishandled the situation. Ken-Ichi Arai, director of the University of Tokyo's Institute of Medical Science, says that residents living near research facilities should be given adequate explanations of an institute's mission and safety precautions regardless of the level of biohazards involved. The government's slow and clumsy response to the threat of contaminated blood products, which resulted in thousands of hemophiliacs being infected with the AIDS virus, has weakened its credibility, adds Arai, whose institute recently held "many, many meetings" to sooth neighborhood qualms over its expansion plans.

NIID's neighbors are appealing the ruling, although a reversal is unlikely. But although they appear to have lost this battle, they and their supporters plan to fight on. They have set up an organization to aid other grassroots groups who want to combat similar facilities, and some plaintiffs have published a book about their experience as a guide for future legal actions. "I think citizen activism regarding biohazards is likely to increase," says Kenji Urata, a law professor at nearby Waseda University.

—DENNIS NORMILE



**Spreading the word.** Losing plaintiffs in suit against infectious diseases lab vow to fight on.

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