

structure, location, operations, financing, and programming of the institutes are sketchy, medical school deans at the meeting were practically salivating over the financial prospects alone. "Such new investments are imperative," says McGill University Dean of Medicine Abraham Fuks. Adds University of Alberta Dean D. Lorne Tyrrell, "I see this as an opportunity to establish a network across the country that would link medical schools and research institutions into a network that would elevate all aspects of research."

The institutes could offset Canada's comparative disadvantages in size and geography while helping universities to satisfy government pressure to specialize, says University of Ottawa Dean of Medicine Peter Walker. "The provincial and federal governments are telling

the universities to differentiate. So that means university A and B are going to have to focus on different areas ... and collaborate so that there are no big loopholes." Ian Bowmer, dean of medicine at Newfoundland's Memorial University, says the concept allows room for programs that meet national needs, such as the research problems associated with health care delivery in rural communities.

The sketchy nature of the scheme has everyone viewing it through the filter of their own desires. But Friesen has proposed some guidelines to address what the MRC sees as critical needs. One would have the institutes provide support for direct costs of research that are not now supported by federal grants, such as investigators' salaries. Friesen also would like to see 20% of the

money used for electronic networking and as much as 40% for basic biomedical research.

Operational details will be fleshed out over the summer by a blue-ribbon advisory committee, with input from the academic community. After that lies the difficult task of garnering the necessary political support. Any successful plan "must serve some Canadian need other than just research for its own sake," says Jon Gerrard, the former federal science minister and current MRC scholar-in-residence who has been helping Friesen develop the initiative. "It will be weighed in terms of the difference it will make on the whole health care system."

—Wayne Kondro

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WOMEN IN SCIENCE

EU Moves to Decrease the Gender Gap

BRUSSELS—European politicians and researchers have long warned about the R&D spending gap between Europe and the United States. Last week, a meeting here heard disturbing reports of an R&D gap of a different kind: the gender gap. Europe is lagging badly behind the United States in terms of equal opportunities for women scientists, according to several recent studies described at the meeting. "The situation is deplorable in the natural sciences," says chemist Godelive Quithoudt-Rowohl, a member of the European Parliament from Germany, where more than 94% of full university professors are men. "One of the key problems is a lack of good, comparable statistics at the European level," says sociologist Hilary Rose of the University of London. "Without statistics, there is perceived to be no problem and therefore [there is] no policy."

Some help may be on the way, however. At the end of the meeting, Edith Cresson, head of research at the European Commission, announced plans for a new initiative to help tackle the problem. She said the commission plans to establish a new unit, called the Observatory of Science and Technology, to gather statistics on the position of women in science throughout Europe and create a new network for women and science. The new unit will also advise the commission on policies to improve the status of women in European science.

Several participants welcomed the announcement. "It's a scandal that the European Union doesn't collect gender-related data," said cell biologist Mary Osborn at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen, who has tried to gather such data from national agencies. Her figures show that fewer than 10% of full professors in most European countries are women, but she has found it difficult to gather comparable international

statistics for specific fields. Others pointed out that statistics are even more sparse on the status of women in European industry. "Looking only at the position of women in universities is just looking at the tip of an iceberg. We're totally ignorant about the overall position [of women]," says Rose.

But Osborn's figures do show just how male-oriented the commission's own science advice is. She found that women made up only 4% of the initial members of one of the commission's senior advisory assemblies. Even after the assembly was reconstituted last year, women still held only 8% of the posts. And all 24 members of the commission's senior industrial science advisory body are male, she adds. She notes that the commission requires that "the members represent an even geographical spread from across the union, because this was stipulated in the conditions. What we need now," she said, "are policies to ensure sufficient women are included."

A number of recent studies reported at the meeting have begun to shake up entrenched European attitudes. A study by biologists Christine Wenneker and Agnes Wold at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden found that three factors had a big influence on the assessment of "scientific competence" of candidates for the award of postdoctoral fellowships run by the Swedish Medical Research Council: the number of published papers, being male, and knowing the reviewers. "Women needed to be 2.6 times as productive in terms of publications to

rank equally with a male colleague," says Wenneker. Another study in Denmark found that women were consistently awarded smaller sums from one grant program than were men. Such findings prompted swift procedural changes in these organizations and sent warning signals throughout Europe.

Europeans are increasingly taking their cues

from the United States, where policies to support women have been in place for many years. Nearly 18% of U.S. full professorships are now held by women. And in Australia, tough measures to ensure that women are promoted and represented on advisory and policy bodies have helped increase the proportion of women in the ranks of full professors to 14%. "The time is now right" for Europe to promote equal opportunities, says Rose. Britain's science minister, John Battle, agrees. "We

need a scheme that looks for the very best practices in attracting women and promoting their careers in science," he told the meeting.

The meeting was timed to precede the final negotiations on the Fifth Framework Program, the multibillion-dollar European research effort scheduled to start up later this year and run until 2002. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the Framework plan should include specific measures to increase the involvement of women. "Women do not yet have the role they should in European science, and that is damaging," says Cresson.

—Nigel Williams



Better numbers. Edith Cresson wants improved data on women in science.