Health. Supporters are hoping that Congress will allocate $100 million for 2003.

–JOCELYN KAISER

BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH

Dexter to Step Down At Wellcome Trust

LONDON—The Wellcome Trust, the $16 billion charitable foundation that dominates British biomedical research, has a year to find a new leader. Mike Dexter has announced that he will not extend his 5-year term.

Dexter, 57, was a respected cancer researcher and newly named director of the Paterson Institute in Manchester when he took the reins of the trust in 1998, after a sale of holdings in the Wellcome drug company turned it into the world's largest medical charity. Many observers say the trust under Dexter's leadership used its money to help save British science, often shaming the government into increasing its own support. Over the next 5 years the trust plans to spend about $4.3 billion, 85% in the United Kingdom, supporting biomedical research and related activities. "[Now] is the right time to begin the search for a successor," Dexter said in a statement about his decision not to seek an optional 2-year extension.

Moving on. Mike Dexter is keeping his options open.

John Bell, head of Oxford University's Department of Clinical Medicine, calls Dexter's decision "a healthy way to run biomedical science. You find people of real quality, but they shouldn't be there forever. A lot was done in 5 years." Dexter has made no plans for what to do next and is "not going to think about it until [his term ends] next year," says a Wellcome spokesperson.

Observers give Dexter credit for charting the trust's recent course, which has included improving salaries and career paths for scientists and coaxing the government into matching an $800 million initiative for modernizing research infrastructure in British universities after years of neglect. Dexter also emphasized the importance of public awareness, says Diana Garnham of the Association of Medical Research Charities. "[The trust] has played an important role in building public confidence in medical research," she says, and has been outspoken on behalf of the use of animals in research and embryonic stem cell research.

But Dexter's work to secure Britain's place in international genomics and large-scale biology may be his most significant accomplishment. Under his direction, the trust pumped hundreds of millions into the Sanger Centre, now Europe's largest sequencing and biological computing facility. The Sanger Centre, in Hinxton, U.K., predates Dexter's arrival, but he "had the vision" to continue pushing for large-scale biology funding, says Bell. Sanger director Allan Bradley says Dexter's presence "played a key role" in his decision to move from the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

The biggest challenge facing the trust may be sustaining its planned growth. The trust had allocated at least $160 million to expand its genome-research campus outside Cambridge, where the Sanger Centre is located, but the local council rejected the initial plans on environmental grounds. A new plan proposes to build a smaller post-genomic research facility with a greater emphasis on basic research and less space for start-up companies.

–MELISSA MERTL

Melissa Mertl is a freelance writer in London.

UNITED KINGDOM

Hard Sciences in Terminal Decline?

LONDON—Physical scientists may not yet be extinct in the United Kingdom, but they are rapidly becoming an endangered species.

This week a high-profile government report* describes how enrollment in physics, engineering, and chemistry courses at British universities fell sharply between 1995 and 2000, despite a rise in the number of graduates across all disciplines. The decline is rippling through the whole supply chain of scientists: Schools cite a dearth of physics teachers, while universities and companies complain of a lack of physical science talent at all experience levels. The United Kingdom is "seriously in danger" of being unable to sustain world-class science, argues Peter Cotgreave of the pressure group Save British Science.

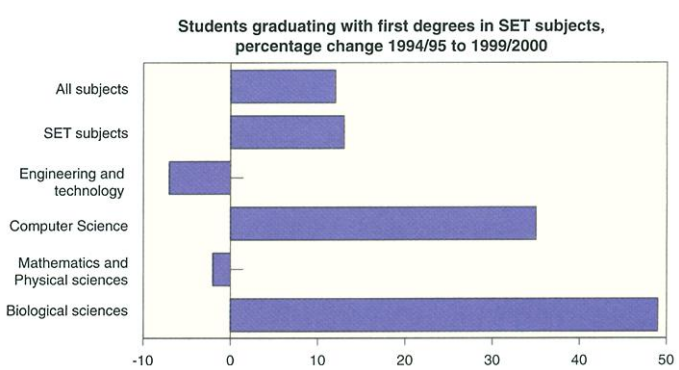
Concerned about the supply of research talent, the Treasury commissioned the report last year and tapped physicist Gareth Roberts to lead the study. Roberts, president of Wolfson College in Oxford, found a scientific community out of balance. Worldwide, only France, New Zealand, and Finland produce more science and engineering graduates per capita than the United Kingdom. But that lead is built upon a 49% rise in the past 5 years in biology, which has masked a 7% decline in physics and engineering graduates and a 16% drop in chemistry over the same period. Such losses have led to "a number of serious problems," says Roberts. Not least the fact that about two-thirds of physics teachers in British schools have no training in physics.

The report calls for a thorough overhaul of the U.K. educational system. One "very urgent" recommendation, Roberts says, is for schools to recruit local university students as teaching assistants, which he calls a better use of their expertise than "filling supermarket shelves." The idea has been kicking around for awhile, but Roberts says it might be taken seriously if the assistants are paid.

The report also urges the Treasury to raise pay for physical scientists at all levels. "It is vital that Ph.D. stipends keep pace with graduate salary expectations," Roberts says. Whereas a new graduate entering employment can expect to take home on average $17,000, a physical scientist staying on in academia gets only $11,000. Postdocs also need a leg up to permanent academic posts, says Roberts, who wants the government to provide funding for 200 new 5-year university fellowships each year. "They should be focused very much on shortage areas," he says.

While welcoming the report, Cotgreave is disappointed that "it doesn't put any figures on how much it's going to cost" to implement. That omission, he says, will make it very difficult to judge the Treasury's response. Science Minister David Sainsbury has promised that the government "will consider" the recommendations in an upcoming spending review, and he notes that the looming shortfall of physical scientists is plaguing many other industrialized nations. "The country that gets this right," Sainsbury says, "has a real opportunity."

–KIRSTIE URQUHART



Hard fall. The physical sciences and engineering are increasingly unpopular majors for British undergraduates.

* www.treasury.gov.uk/Documents/Enterprise_and_Productivity/Research_and_Enterprise/ent_res_roberts.cfm

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