

LETTERS

Academic plot

The University College of Cardiff is in serious financial difficulty. The strategies which are to be recommended to the College Senate by the Faculty of Science were made known to members of staff on 31 March. The document I refer to was entitled an "Academic Plan" and was produced by the Dean of the Faculty of Science. This document describes the necessity for closing six departments in University College, Cardiff, namely: microbiology, applied mathematics, music, Welsh, theatre studies and home economics. The criteria that these decisions are based on are quoted in the document as follows: poor demand; minimisation of academic damage to the college as a whole; high recurrent costs; probability of realising capital assets; the likely future development of higher education in Cardiff.

If we take the case of my own department, it will be obvious how absurd the document really is (aside from the implications of no longer teaching Welsh in the capital city of Wales).

The microbiology department in Cardiff was the first, and is still the only independent, department of microbiology in Wales. It was the third such department to be opened in Britain and currently has one of the largest honours schools of microbiology in Britain.

Last year there were 150 applicants for the 25 places available in single honours microbiology: this hardly indicates a lack of demand!

A recent survey, by this department, of the employment pages in *New Scientist* and *Nature* gave the astonishing result that 40 per cent of all jobs/positions advertised in these journals were suitable for qualified microbiologists. In addition, biotechnology is the fastest-growing industry in South Wales. It seems totally ridiculous not to have a centre of excellence where it is really required. That the department of microbiology in

Cardiff is a centre of excellence speaks for itself. The staff in this department produce more scientific publications than any other department in the college, with an average of 5.4 publications per member of staff per year. (I may add the the Dean of Science has produced only 3 in the past 10 years, and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts only 2 in the past 10 years.)

If we look at the undergraduate attainment, 48 per cent of our undergraduates obtain a first class or upper second class degree, compared with 38 per cent for the Faculty of Science in general. If we look at postgraduate achievements, 82 per cent of postgraduate students complete higher degrees,



almost double the 42 per cent of other departments in the Faculty of Science and the 52 per cent for biology departments throughout the whole of Britain.

Our department can hardly be classed as uneconomic. If we look at the income to the department during 1985-86 from sources other than the University Grants Committee, the microbiology department brought in £18 250 per member of staff. The average figure for all other departments in the Faculty of Science was £13 000 per member of staff.

Many postgraduates have benefited immeasurably from the superb research tradition of the department, such that they, like myself, are considering offers from eminent research establishments at

home and abroad. My own future thus secured, I am left to ponder the destiny of the 35 scientists or more who will be forced to terminate their half-finished projects and look for employment elsewhere!

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AIDS collaboration

I am disappointed that Dr Karpas should have chosen to interpret my letter of the 20 June, 1983, in the manner that he has (Letters, 12 March, p 65). I wish to correct the impression that we "refused to give him blood samples".

Karpas has never requested such samples other than as part of a collaboration, as he had telephoned me in May 1983 to offer a collaboration. Since our group was, and remains, a democracy, any requests for a collaboration or for resources relating to patients enrolled in the study cohort at the Middlesex Hospital are discussed in a monthly forum. I asked Karpas to write explaining his interests in a collaboration and quote directly from his reply of the 3 June to myself:

"My contribution could be in the short- or long-term culture of the patients WBC. If none of your group or collaborators are interested in doing this aspect of the research, I could contribute my expertise in human haemic cell culture."

In his letter he goes on to say that he would require 10 millilitres of heparinised blood from each patient.

At our AIDS collaborative group meeting in June we discussed whether we should take up Karpas's offer. My letter to Karpas informing him of our decision is quite straightforward and I quote from it:

"When I spoke to you I said that we had a number of laboratories working together and that we felt

most aspects to be covered adequately. We have direct collaboration proceeding with Dr Weiss's and Dr Beverley's groups which includes evaluation of sera for HTLV markers and setting up of long-term cell cultures from peripheral blood and nodal mononuclear cells. I have to abide by the decision of the group which is that at present we do not see a justification to increase the number of collaborating laboratories."

These were early days and in the absence of funding, our resources were extremely fragile. I went on in my letter to say:

"Although we cannot agree on collaboration I hope that we will be able at sometime to offer material from patients to research workers in the UK in order to help control what is really quite a nasty disease."

As far as I am concerned, Karpas has never requested any materials or resources from our group which we have knowingly withheld. Indeed, I remember helping him to collect for culture purposes cells from a spleen removed from one of our patients. Such help can hardly be construed as a blanket refusal of assistance.

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Chemical hazard

It is reassuring to read that scientists at the American Association for the Advancement of Science addressed the dangers of "irresponsible" use of pesticides (This Week, 26 February, p 19). As the caption to the picture accompanying the article, "Resistant pests pose a worldwide danger", notes: "Indiscriminate spraying is everyone's problem."

GRIMBLETON DOWN

Bill Tidy

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