

# BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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## CORRESPONDENCE

## Consumer-orientated Research

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SIR,—Neither the Dainton nor the Rothschild reports are satisfactory.<sup>1</sup> The Dainton report gives the impression of a manifesto of an establishment on the retreat, suitably introduced by prayer. It avoids all discussion of whether enough tactical research is being carried out and, if there is insufficient at present, how the gap is to be filled. The Rothschild report is full of practical gusto, but fails to establish the need for such a drastic change. It does therefore appear to be the duty of those in the field to attempt to clarify the issues. I write as a medical scientist who has been closely associated with the M.R.C. for about 24 years, for which I have the greatest admiration and affection. During the last five years I have also been sufficiently closely associated with Department of Health and Social Security to understand its problems. My own research would probably be described in Daintonesque terminology as towards the tactical end of the M.R.C.'s strategic research.

I would like to start by making four points. Firstly, the M.R.C., on the Addisonian principle, was never designed to do applied research, but has in the past done, and is increasingly doing, some applied research. It is difficult to know what percentage of its money is spent in this way, but the figures given in *A Framework for Government Research and Development*<sup>1</sup> do not suggest it is very large. For instance on page 32 one learns that the amount spent on "epidemiology: medical statistics" is £81,000 compared with £749,000 spent on "neurology, neurophysiology and special senses."

for monitoring and evaluation. Thirdly, during the first years of the N.H.S. practically no applied medical research was done. In the last five years there has been a considerable increase in applied research financed by the D.H.S.S. but it has already run into difficulties, particularly in relation to recruiting medical scientists. One reason for this is the M.R.C.'s deservedly high reputation, which is unfortunately interpreted as meaning "pure" research is the only "respectable" type of research.

Finally, the applied research needed to run our N.H.S. can only be done in this country. "Pure" research can and is being done in most developed countries.

If these facts are accepted Rothschild's revolutionary plan seems much more reasonable. It can be seen as a determined effort to deal with a severe back-log which threatens the future of the N.H.S.

What should be the correct ratio between pure and applied research is, of course, unknown. It would be scientifically more satisfactory, and politically easier, if the ratio was adjusted by giving more money for applied research without cutting the M.R.C.'s budget, but this may not be possible. Some adjustment is clearly necessary. The other difficulty is the contract basis which is suggested for 25%-50% of the M.R.C.'s budget. It clearly would be ideal if the M.R.C. were able to find several directors who were interested in and enjoyed doing applied research and give them units. Applied research would then slowly lose its "non-U" image, but the proposed contract basis of the research makes the unit method with its career structure almost impossible. It is sincerely to be hoped that some compromise between the M.R.C. and

the D.H.S.S. can be reached on this point.

The basic idea of consumer-orientated research is attractive because it seems likely to establish the correct priorities, and it could be used in contracts with universities and other organizations in getting the necessary applied research done.—I am, etc.,

A. L. COCHRANE

## Barry, Glam

<sup>1</sup> *A Framework for Government Research and Development*. Cmnd. 4814. London, H.M.S.O., 1971.

## Doctors and Overpopulation

SIR,—The letter with a very impressive medical backing (8 January, p. 108) suggests five lines of approach aimed at stabilizing or reducing the present increasing population. While all these measures are highly relevant and important, I would suggest that probably the most effective one has been omitted.

The Duke of Edinburgh recently mentioned it in some public statement, to wit, the question of child allowances and taxation. I would suggest that the Government should review child allowances with a view to their abolition after the second or third child and that they should give a year or eighteen months' notice of so doing, which would have the effect of advising prospective parents that the Government was not prepared to financially sponsor overpopulation.

I suggest this measure, apart from its propagandist value, as endorsing the Government's concern at the increasing population, would have a very effective result in the long term.—I am, etc.,

ALAN S. SIMPSON

## Hyde, Cheshire