

British science deserves appropriate scrutiny



It is almost 3 years since a devastating inquiry into the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) prompted Ian Gibson MP, chair of the UK Select Committee on Science and Technology (CST), which did the investigation, to describe the MRC as an example of why “scrutiny of British science is so badly needed”. At the time, it was a sentiment with which few disagreed. But a more recent inquiry in which the MRC and CST once again locked horns suggests that Gibson and his colleagues are in need of scrutiny themselves.

Implicit in Gibson’s triumphant statement of 2003 is the notion that the CST’s rigorous questioning is what holds British research to account. But time and again during a Nov 30 inquiry into the MRC’s recent trip to southeast Asia, the CST panel members showed themselves to be ill-informed about use of research in public policy, and to have scant knowledge of the activities of the funding bodies they supposedly monitor. They assailed MRC head Colin Blakemore with questions on financial contributions made by the Department of Health—an organisation unconnected to the MRC. They pressed him for comments

on use of incentives for industry to boost vaccine-manufacturing capacity—an issue outside the MRC’s research remit. And, despite protests from Blakemore that the MRC does not advise the government directly, the CST persisted in demanding a yes or no answer about whether such non-existent advice had been heeded.

Had Blakemore been questioned more extensively on the MRC’s activities, the CST might well have been impressed: the past 3 years have seen the organisation shrug off claims of financial mismanagement and regain the confidence of scientists. Last week’s announcement of a £10 million cash boost for influenza research, a large proportion of which will be ring-fenced for emergency work in the event of a pandemic, is a case in point.

The fact that the CST needs no rationale for its questions of inquiry partly explains why, as in the MRC hearing, it persists in addressing important questions to the wrong witnesses. What it does not explain, however, is why the Committee’s interrogations are considered an acceptable way to maintain standards in British science. ■ *The Lancet*

For *The Lancet*’s criticisms of the MRC see *Lancet* 2003; **361**: 1143. DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(03)12961-3

For the Nov 30 CST inquiry see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmstech/uc713-i/uc71302.htm>

Marketing food to children

With American children’s pocket-money now stretching to around US\$200 billion each year, the annual expenditure by food and drink companies of \$10 billion on marketing to children is a financially worthwhile investment indeed. However, according to the US Institute of Medicine (IOM) in its report, *Food marketing to children and youth: threat or opportunity*, published last week, “food and beverage marketing to children in America represents, at best, a missed opportunity, and, at worst, a direct threat to the health of the next generation.” Sadly, as the IOM report shows, advertising giants are pushing the wrong food and drinks. Television adverts directly influence children’s consumption of food, and increase their chances of becoming obese. This influence affects children younger than 8 years old disproportionately, as they lack the ability to differentiate between commercial and non-commercial content and to attribute persuasive intent to advertising. The marketing drive towards toddlers and children is not limited to television alone, with an increasing emphasis on product placement, in-school activities, and character licensing.

Ironically, the obese ogre Shrek, in the world of marketing, not only persuades children what to eat but, unintentionally, shows what they may become if they eat it.

This corporate disregard for children’s health is not confined to America. In Europe around one in four children is obese, and 400 000 more children become obese each year. As a consequence, the European Commission last week launched its green paper on the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity. As EU Health Commissioner Markos Kyprianou says, “today’s overweight teenagers are tomorrow’s heart attack or diabetes victims”. In the UK, June, 2006, will see the provisional second reading of the Children’s Food Bill. The Bill includes specific mention of the prohibition of marketing certain foods and drinks to children. What the USA and Europe still lack, however, is the legislative ability to protect children from the malign influence of some advertising strategies. Without this legislation, children will continue to become fat, along with the wallets of advertising executives. ■ *The Lancet*

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For the IOM report see <http://www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=31330>