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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

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FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

The Rt Hon Norman Fowler MP
 Secretary of State for Social Services
 Alexander Fleming House
 Elephant and Castle
 London SE1 6BY

2 December 1985

Dear Norman.

AIDS

I wrote to you on 6 November about the MRC's plans to establish, at the request of your Department, a national centre to coordinate epidemiological studies on AIDS. My letter pointed out that to meet the costs of this centre the MRC would need to cut back disruptively on this year's other commitments and on their future plans. I argued that the very modest financial contribution which you had so far been able to offer failed to reflect the primary responsibility of you and your fellow Health Ministers for action on what is essentially a national public health emergency.

The Advisory Board for the Research Councils had some discussion about this when they met on 27 November to consider the final Science Budget allocations for 1986-87. The Chairman of the Board, Professor Sir David Phillips, has since written to me conveying the Board's views. A copy of his letter is attached.

As you will see the Board advised me that it would be unreasonable for the costs of the AIDS epidemiological research centre to be met from the Science Budget. Their view is that the Health Departments should contribute to the costs "on a scale commensurate with their responsibility for public health and for the Health Service."

In my letter of 6 November I said that I would be willing to find £0.2m per annum from 1986-87 towards the cost of the centre. That remains my position. In the light of the Advisory Board's advice I do not feel able to offer any more than £0.2m nor am I willing to direct the MRC to meet the balance of the costs from within their share of the Science Budget.

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As you may have heard I had some discussion about this matter with Barney Hayhoe on 13 November in the margins of a meeting about clinical academics' pay. When we met Barney explained that there were pressures on your research budget, but I question whether these can be greater than or even as great as those on the Science Budget. Barney also referred to the additional funds which the Wellcome Trust will have available for funding biomedical research from next year. My understanding, however, is that the Trust would not be prepared to see any of these funds used in substitution for Government funding: it is therefore not realistic to expect the Trust to make any money available for the MRC's epidemiological studies which will be clearly seen as related to public health needs.

I am very anxious that Ministers should not be seen to be squabbling amongst themselves about responsibilities for meeting the cost of work which is urgently needed in the face of the AIDS emergency. As I said in my earlier letter it is important that the Government makes a collective response. The MRC has already committed substantial funds to AIDS research from within its existing budget; while I am offering a further £0.2m per annum towards the cost of the new centre. I repeat my request that you, George Younger and Nicholas Edwards between you find the further £0.3m per annum which is needed from 1986-87.

There is some urgency about resolving this: Sir James Gowans is to speak to the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee on AIDS on 10 December and it could be acutely embarrassing for the Government if Sir James were able to claim on that occasion that inter-departmental wrangling was holding up vital work.

I am copying this letter to Cabinet colleagues and to Sir Robert Armstrong and Sir Robin Nicholson.

*Yours sincerely,
Lewis*

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Advisory Board for the Research Councils

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Your reference

Our reference

Date 29 November 1985

Dear Secretary of State,

ABRC ADVICE ON DISTRIBUTION OF SCIENCE BUDGET

AIDS

I have today written to you forwarding the Board's advice on the distribution of the additional £15m which you have secured for the Science Budget from 1986-87. Paragraph 18 of that advice reads as follows:

"Following the emergence of the AIDS problem in the UK, the MRC took steps to promote research on AIDS in mid 1983 and has already awarded some £430,000 in research grants. We understand that, after an approach from the DHSS, the MRC is setting up a national centre for coordination of epidemiological research on AIDS which is likely to cost £150,000 in 1985-86 and about £0.5m per annum thereafter. We are clear that the establishment of the centre is an urgently needed response to a public health emergency and that as such the DHSS should meet all the costs."

I thought I should write to you separately to amplify the Board's discussion on this point, as recorded above.

The MRC were represented at the Board's discussion by Dr Malcolm Godfrey, their Second Secretary, in the absence overseas of Sir James Gowans. Dr Godfrey explained to the board that the MRC were already running an AIDS research programme at a cost of £430,000 when, in the middle of this year, they were asked by the DHSS to undertake in addition studies of the UK epidemiology - particularly to establish the pattern of the spread of the disease in this country. DHSS need a better understanding of the epidemiology of AIDS in order to take the public health measures needed to counter the spread of infection. In response to DHSS' request, the MRC identified the need to establish a centre to coordinate epidemiological studies on AIDS and to act as a "database" from which specific investigations into the ways in which the disease is spreading in the UK will be mounted. The Council estimates that it would need

to spend some £150,000 on these activities in 1985-86; and £0.5m per annum thereafter.

The MRC do not regard work of this kind as falling outside its remit. They do however consider that it is unreasonable for the costs to be met from the Science Budget given that the Council have already awarded £430,000 on AIDS research and given the severe pressures on their overall budget which mean that they are unable to fund many very high quality research projects.

The Board were given to understand that the DHSS, in response to a request from MRC, had indicated that they might be able to find £50,000 towards the total costs of the epidemiological research programme either this year or next. The Board were of the view that this was an inadequate response from the Department. It was pointed out that the total costs of the epidemiological research programme are dwarfed by the potential costs of caring for AIDS victims within the Health Service.

The Board were also of the view that it would not be appropriate for any of the new money for the Science Budget - the £15m - to be diverted to the epidemiological research programme. We understand that the additional £15m was secured to meet the twin objectives of sustaining strategic research of industrial relevance and helping to halt the brain drain of talented British scientists. The Board could not advise that the AIDS epidemiological research would have a high priority against these criteria.

I urge you therefore on behalf of the Board to seek to persuade your DHSS ministerial colleagues to contribute to the costs of MRC's epidemiological research programme on a scale commensurate with their responsibility for public health and for the Health Service.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Williams

p.p DAVID PHILLIPS

Approved by Sir David Phillips
but signed in his absence.

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