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New MRC head named

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Colin Blakemore, a neuroscientist who currently heads the [MRC Centre for Cognitive Neuroscience](#) at Oxford University, has been named as the new chief executive of the [Medical Research Council](#).

The appointment, announced yesterday (May 12) by Science Minister [Lord Sainsbury](#), ends months of speculation about who would succeed Sir George Radda when he completes his four-year tenure as chief executive. Blakemore will take up his position on October 1 this year, and will receive an annual salary of £110,000, plus potential performance-related annual bonuses of up to 20%.

Blakemore studied medical sciences at Cambridge University and completed his PhD at the University of California, Berkeley. He holds Doctor of Science degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. His research has mainly focused on vision and the early development of the brain, but he has also won acclaim for his work in raising the profile of science. Now chairman, formerly president, of the [British Association for the Advancement of Science](#), he also won the [Michael Faraday Award](#) in 1989 for his work to further public engagement with science.

But he takes over the helm at the MRC at a time when the UK's leading research institution has more than its share of troubles.

Earlier this year, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee launched a [scathing attack](#) on the MRC over its £45 million [Biobank project](#). The project, which involves collecting DNA samples from 500,000 middle-aged people in the UK, has been marketed by the MRC as a potential key to unlocking the secrets of some genetic diseases. The hope is it will eventually lead to new and better treatments. But MPs hit out at what they called poor financial management and slammed the Biobank scheme as a "politically-driven project."

More recently, the MRC has [faced rebellion from scientists](#) angry at the planned closure of the National Institute for Medical Research at Mill Hill in north London. It wants to relocate the institute to Cambridge.

Nevertheless, Lord Sainsbury insisted Blakemore's skills — both in science and communication — would benefit the MRC. "His research background, active participation in science councils and associations, as well as his extensive efforts to improve public engagement with science will be a great asset for the Council," he said.

Martin Raff, from the MRC [Laboratory for Molecular Cell Biology](#) at University College London, said Blakemore's communication skills equipped him well for the job. "I think he's a good choice. He's a very well respected scientist but one of his major strengths is that he's a great communicator and the MRC needs that type of person right now."

But Raff warned there would be no honeymoon period in the job, with the MRC's troubles likely to require some difficult decisions from the new chief executive. "He will have a lot of stuff on his plate," he added.

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