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## New plans for NIMR

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Britain's [Medical Research Council](#) (MRC) has abandoned plans to close one of its flagship institutions in north London and replace it with a scaled-down operation 50 miles away in Cambridge.

Instead, it is now considering proposals to shift the [National Institute for Medical Research](#) (NIMR) from its base in Mill Hill to a central London location - a distance of around 10 miles. The idea is that it could then join forces with [King's College](#) or [University College](#) to focus on what the MRC calls "more patient-based research."

The latest plans emerged from a task force set up by the MRC last year after an unprecedented revolt by scientists over the Cambridge initiative.

The institute, set up in 1913, was behind some of the major achievements in 20th century science, including the discovery of the influenza virus, the development of liquid gas chromatography, and the discovery of the sex-determining gene. But the MRC was not convinced about the financial benefits of retaining the institute, which has an annual budget of £27 million (USD \$49.7 million) and employs more than 700 staff, at its current size on its existing site.

All 18 heads of division at the NIMR reportedly walked out of a meeting with MRC chiefs in April last year when they failed to get assurances that the Cambridge plans were up for debate. They later wrote to George Radda, MRC chief executive at the time, demanding the proposals be withdrawn. They feared the move would fragment the many research disciplines found at the Mill Hill site and destroy its capacity for groundbreaking research.

Within weeks, Radda agreed to consider "a broader set of options" for its future. The task force, made up of MRC members, independent experts, and senior NIMR scientists, has spent the last 12 months considering those options.

It vetoed the Cambridge move, but still believes that relocating is the best option - providing that an "appropriate partnership arrangement" can be negotiated. King's College and University College have until July 29 to come up with provisional plans for how each could accommodate such a move.

In its report, the task force concluded: "The institute, which has a strong reputation for its basic science, should embrace leadership in research more directly related to the health and disease of human beings. This mission would be facilitated by siting the institute in an academic and clinical environment."

The big advantage, the report states, would be improved access to other biologists, physical scientists, engineers, and mathematicians and the opportunities to work more closely with clinicians. But such a move can only go ahead if the benefits are more attractive than staying at Mill Hill. Even if talks start now, the task force stressed, it would take 5 to 10 years to complete.

"I'm delighted that the task force has reached a unanimous conclusion," said current MRC chief executive [Colin Blakemore](#). "Its recommendations would enable NIMR to build on its achievements and take the lead in future research to benefit human health."

But some scientists who fought the Cambridge move still have doubts about switching to central London - even though they welcome the possibility of greater collaboration with top universities and hospitals.

"I just can't see it happening," said [Tim Bliss](#), head of neurophysiology at the NIMR. "It would have cost about £80 million (USD \$147.3 million) to build a new institute in Cambridge for a smaller number of people."

"So to build one for 700 people in central London is going to cost an enormous amount of money. Yet the task force, in its report, made it clear that the option for moving must be weighed against whether it's more attractive than staying at Mill Hill. It's hard to see how the cost would be justified," said Bliss.

Bliss was pleased though, that task force members had agreed the NIMR needed to remain a multidisciplinary research center housed on one site. "Having a large research institute under one roof is what's driven the whole culture at the NIMR," he added.

Fellow scientist [Robin Lovell-Badge](#), a member of the task force, said he was convinced the Cambridge move would have meant "the death of the NIMR."

"People here are relieved at the idea that the institute should stay together and remain about the same size. But King's College or University College have to be able to accommodate the whole institute and provide the right facilities," said Lovell-Badge. "It's clearly going to cost a lot to build and that's a major practical consideration."

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