Q. You have never shied away from controversy – either during your research, with your willingness to take on animal-rights protesters, or now at the MRC. Why did you decide to take this on this new role?

A. It would be easy to invent all sorts of reasons, but the simple fact is that I have been a researcher since the mid-1960s who has been largely supported by the MRC. I still love research work, but I am 59 years old and I thought that if I was going to do something different, then I had better do it now. There is rather a limited range of possibilities for someone who has spent their whole career as an academic, but working for a funding agency is one of them. I had not recently been involved in the management of the MRC. In the distant past, I did sit on scientific panels and committees, but I have never been on Council. Therefore I am a bit of an outsider as far as the MRC central structure is concerned. I think the fact that the MRC has appointed a relative outsider is a refreshing sign.

Q. During the first few months, you have been involved in a ‘Road Show’ across the UK to determine views held about the MRC from clinicians and researchers. Have any of these views surprised you?

A. I think that the road shows have been enormously successful. I have learnt a great deal, especially about university strategic development and the public view of the MRC, but I have not been too surprised by the views expressed to me by individual researchers. As a researcher myself, I knew the problems. The shortage of money for research is always a major concern. However, the problems of recruiting, retaining and supporting young investigators are also paramount.

Q. Perhaps one of the most controversial steps of the MRC in recent years was the introduction of co-operative grants. How do you see the future of this mode of grant funding under your governance?

A. The virtual abolition of individual project-grant funding by the MRC 5 or 6 years ago is clearly a source of concern for the scientific community. The MRC has just published a report on Co-operative Group Grants and its conclusions are very clear. Although there is a need for infrastructure support for collaboration, the Co-operative Group Grants are widely unpopular and they came to be seen as excluding researchers from conventional project-grant support, rather than as a genuine and simple mechanism for encouraging interaction. There is also a feeling that some of the co-operatives are “marriages of convenience”, invented mainly to get access to funding.

My feeling is that collaboration is best motivated by scientific necessity. We must however, retain the best features of the Co-op scheme.
It is important that the MRC should provide specific support for collaboration, but in a simplified form.

The MRC is thinking about comprehensive and radical changes in the whole granting scheme. We would like to invent a completely flexible form of grant support, perhaps called simply a ‘Research Grant’. This might be anything from 0 to 5 years in duration and could cover an enormous variety of different kinds of work – from a pilot clinical trial to a full old-style programme grant, with the equivalent of a project grant somewhere in the middle. The applicant will simply specify the work to be done and the resources needed to do it.

“A real crash in performance will occur very soon unless we build a sustainable research community. Getting into bed with industry is not the answer!”

The MRC currently offers 20 or so different sorts of research grants, but I want to simplify this down to just a few – perhaps even just a couple of sorts of response-mode grant.

At the same time, I want to simplify the research-board structure and give them more responsibility and power. Presently, the principal role of boards is reviewing programme grant applications. They make recommendations, but it is often not until months later that the Council makes a decision as to whether the grants should be funded. It is an unrewarding process for the boards. I want to encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility in the boards. There are two things that I hope to do to achieve this. First, the boards will have their own budgets, so they can fund grants on the day of the board meeting. They will also be able to hold money over, from round to round, or even from year to year, if they feel that the quality of applications is not sufficiently high in any particular round. Second, I want the boards to be much more involved in developing the strategic thinking of the MRC.

Strategy is essential when presenting arguments to government: they must be put in a strategic form. Just saying that, “We do awfully good science, so please give us more money”, does not work. We need to frame our strategy to match the needs of individual researchers, and the boards are best positioned to do that. These views will then be fed into a new central mechanism for strategy development.

The major focus of my work over the next few months is to carry through with this wholesale restructuring, at the start of my term of office I hope that new ideas can be pushed forward. The staff and Council at the MRC have also been very supportive in developing these ideas, and, subject to full Council approval in February, we hope to have the whole new structure in place by April 2004.

Q. The research community must have absolute confidence in the fairness of the funding process. The confidence in the MRC seems to have been somewhat eroded in recent years with the perception that more money is going to the MRC Units rather than to response-mode grant funding. Do you need to redress the balance?

A. I hear concerns from universities that the Units are protected and privileged, but the Units themselves have a precarious existence. Researchers who do not succeed in a Unit have nothing to fall back on — no academic or teaching post. If a Unit closes, and 28 have over the last 10 years, then the researchers there suffer much more than a university researcher who has had a grant turned down. There does, however, have to be an absolutely level playing field between the research at MRC Units and that elsewhere. At the very least we must aim to be able to fund all the Alpha-A response-mode grant applications.

Q. The MRC is world-renowned for its ‘hot-house’ institutes and the success that they have attained. How are you going to ensure that this success continues?

A. The Intramural funding will continue, but a healthy balance between this and response-mode funding must be maintained. Ten new MRC Units have opened over the last 11 years, and there is, and should be, sufficient flexibility and flux in the system to allow for this. The Units must, however, justify their own existence for continuation.
Q. Can UK science ever hope to compete with that undertaken in the US?
A. It is remarkable that we still have such a strong scientific presence. We spend a relatively low fraction of our GDP on research – about on a par with Austria, and certainly much less than the US, Japan, France, Germany, Korea and Iceland. Despite the government’s stated commitment to science for wealth creation, innovation and health improvement, in real terms, we are spending less on research now than we did in the 1980s.

I fear that the government might believe that the large charities such as The Wellcome Trust and Cancer Research UK can fill the funding gap for medical research. Of course, in the US, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have received massive increases in funding over recent years and the US also has many other funding agencies, such as the Howard Hughes Institute and numerous private foundations.

The NIH budget is 40 times that of the MRC, but in terms of citation impact, the UK is perhaps half that of the US. This is fantastic value for money, but it cannot go on forever. We need to do a better job in showing the Treasury what it is getting for its input.

Unless dramatic increases in funding are seen, and seen soon, UK science will not be able to be maintained at this level. A real crash in performance will occur very soon unless we build a sustainable research community. Getting into bed with industry is not the answer. Scientists need to be allowed to do what they are good at. They don’t all need to become entrepreneurs. Basic research money has to come from the government if we are going to maintain the position that we currently hold in the science league table.

Q. Do you see the formation of a European Research Council as a significant threat to the activities of the MRC?
A. It is very likely that a European Research Council will be formed over the next year or so. Both the Irish and the Dutch are very keen on the idea, and it will probably happen during their forthcoming respective presidencies of the EU.

If the European Research Council learns from the mistakes of the Framework Programmes — if it is less bureaucratic, if is less politically driven, if it is less obsessed with balancing geographic location of members of the consortia — then I would support it. The UK research councils are fully engaged with discussion about the formation of a European Research Council. It is likely to happen, in our view, so it is better that we are in the driving seat, rather than running behind.

Q. After you have left the Chief Executive role, how would you like your time to be remembered? What would be your legacy?
A. I hope that I will have been able to satisfy the maximum number of punters. Which, of course, means getting more money to fund more research. I dream about doubling the MRC budget over the next four years. I am starting to campaign for this both in the media and to government. I have been doing media work for over 30 years, and I am very happy to use my contacts to raise the profile of the MRC. We have been rather reticent to do this in the past. We should be shouting about our 22 Nobel prizes rather than merely being quietly satisfied with them.

“I will fight to try to ensure that a European Research Council does not get funded by money that would otherwise have gone to the MRC.”

Colin Blakemore, FMedSci, FRS, became Chief Executive of the MRC on 1 October 2003. He studied Medical Sciences at Cambridge and completed a PhD at the University of California in Berkeley. After 11 years in the Department of Physiology at Cambridge, he became Warden Professor of Physiology at Oxford in 1979 and was Director of the MRC IRC for Cognitive Neuroscience for 8 years. His research is concerned with vision and the early development of the brain. He has been President of the British Neuroscience Association, the Physiological Society and the new Biosciences Federation. He has also been President and Chairman of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and he is strongly committed to the public communication of science.