

TUS NEWSLETTER

August 2013

The latest phase of the university unit programme saw the Cell Biology Unit, Clinical Trials Unit and Lifelong Health and Ageing Unit transferring to University College London on the first of August. The university unit programme has seen 1000 MRC employees in 14 units transfer to seven host universities.

The staff consultation process supporting the programme has varied across the transfers with each unit having differing needs and concerns such as career progression and pensions. The universities also had different approaches from one another in areas such as pay management and HR policies. The NTUS worked with management to establish some central principles, underpinned by an agreed *University Unit Consultation* policy which aimed to coordinate the consultation process and align key points to the Council Gateway process. The NTUS worked with the Local Trade Union Side, established in each unit, to ensure that a collective staff view was presented to management, questions were voiced and the appropriate reassurances given by the MRC and the university.

Meaningful staff consultation is more than just being a legal requirement during such organisational change, it is essential to staff investment in the enterprise and therefore its success. To be really effective, such consultation requires an understanding between the employer and staff representatives, both of whom have to be fully committed to the process. To this end, staff in each of the transferred units have been well served by the trade unions and the MRC working together for the mutual benefit of the staff and organisation.



The Lab Boys of Mill Hill

The history of the MRC is awash with the accounts of famous scientists, both those responsible for undertaking ground breaking research and those advocating the MRC as a valued institution.

There is another history - that of the technical and support staff who were 'hands on', making and running the equipment essential to achieving the great medical advances. An interesting paper by Prof Tansey, *Keeping the culture alive: the laboratory technician in mid-twentieth-century British medical research*¹, is based largely on interviews with staff at NIMR and shows the evolution and growing importance of the role of Laboratory Technician from 'lab boys' to authors of scientific papers in their own right. Prof Tansey, who was a key speaker at the NTUS Centenary Seminar held earlier in the year, has kindly agreed to let us use her work in this article. She points out the importance of technicians both in the beginning of the MRC and today in supporting the science and leading the way in developing new equipment, stating:

*They are crucial in passing on knowledge, practical skills, attitudes and approaches; metaphorically—and quite literally in some circumstances—they keep alive the very 'culture' of a laboratory.*¹

As an organisation, the MRC accepted early on that laboratory attendants were required to assist scientific staff. Assistants were appointed straight from school with individual contracts, personal pay and no pension. By the early 1920's the MRC had developed a pay structure for all staff: scientific, technical and maintenance.

Training

Until the Second World War, technicians tended to be recruited from grammar schools in North London based on their

scientific aptitude. There was no structured training, it was either provided by the scientists, obtained through work experience or by home study. One technician interviewed by Prof Tansey said that he began work in 1928 and his responsibilities were:

*Everything. I was the lab boy. I held the animals when they wanted animals injected, I made up any solutions they wanted, I helped to make apparatus that was required, I did almost everything for them. All the services and things that were there. And then in my spare time, I used to dust the lab, every morning, the lab had to be dusted every morning. And once a week all the shelves had to be cleared and bottles taken off*¹

After the Second World War there was a move to provide organised training as a result of the changing demands of medical research, with techniques becoming more specialised. At NIMR this first started as in house training courses given by scientists and senior technicians but eventually led to a day release scheme at the local college. This was promoted by the Association of Scientific Workers (AScW - a precursor of Unite), working with other organisations to produce a nationally accepted technical qualification. By the 1960s it was expected that junior technicians would attend colleges on a day release scheme as part of their overall training.

Technicians Pay

Initially there were A and B pay grades, with the 'A' grade reserved for a few senior technicians. In 1932 a 'B' grade Technician aged 21 earned 50 shillings per week (£2.50) rising one shilling per week for each year until aged 30, with no incremental increases thereafter.

¹ <http://rsnr.rovallsocietypublishing.org/content/62/1/77.full>

With the support of the ASCW a new unified pay structure was introduced in 1944 and medically qualified technicians achieved equivalence to those in the NHS in 1949. Other technicians joined this scale in 1950 after permission from the Treasury. These successes led to a surge in union membership and union recognition followed shortly after.

Status

Some technicians who had been at NIMR for over 15 years, were still being termed 'Lab boys' into the late 1940s. At the first Institute in Hampstead there were separate dining rooms for scientific staff, junior technicians, senior technicians and for women. When the Institute moved to Mill Hill in 1950 there was one canteen, although each category of staff still tended to eat together. Scientists wore white lab coats and technical staff brown coats and they often did not share the same lifts. All women (there were very few at the time) wore white lab coats. This patriarchal regime broke down in the 1950s under the direction of Sir Peter Medawar. One important step was the removal of the hated attendance book (which had to be signed every morning) and the late book. If you signed the late book a couple of times in the month you were disciplined – even if you worked late into the evening. It was at this time that technical staff began to get some acknowledgment of their research involvement, having previously had none.

Today the general culture is very informal. The rule of the thumb is - that if you are wearing a suit, you are probably an external consultant.

Members' Pay Ballot

The National Trade Union Side submitted a formal pay claim to MRC management ahead of the 2013 pay remit. In response to the pay claim, and subject to the constraints of the government pay policy, management have now made a formal pay offer which is detailed within staff bulletin 475. Following the offer, Unite and UCU unions are holding a ballot of members.

The Francis Crick Institute

The topping out ceremony was held on the 6th June, with the strategy "Discovery without Boundaries" launched alongside the event. The consultation process on the transfer of the NIMR staff to the new Institute is continuing with the transfer of staff expected in April 2015. A number of working groups have been established to look at various areas of the transition, including space planning and biological services. A new HR Director, John Macey, has been appointed to the Crick due to the departure of Amanda Arrowsmith. John is currently the HR Director at Cancer Research UK and it is expected to take up his new appointment late September.

Harmonisation

The NTUS has, along with the trade unions of the other six research Councils, been in discussions with the RCUK management aimed at harmonising terms and conditions of employment (see *TUS Newsletter* December 2012). These discussions which exclude some key areas such as pay, redundancy provision and pensions, have now concluded with the NTUS being unable to reach agreement. While the RCUK proposals are based on MRC HR policies, in the view of the NTUS, they represent a detriment to our current terms. The MRC will therefore keep its current terms and conditions, sitting outside the harmonisation project.

Equality and Diversity

As part of the MRC's Equality and Diversity strategy, a series of Wikipedia 'edit-a-thons' have been scheduled to improve the record of female contributions to scientific research, who have often been over-looked.

The online encyclopaedia is a popular source for information for many and this exercise aims to provide female scientists with the acknowledgement that they deserve for their ground breaking contributions to research. It is also hoped that by improving the profile of past and present female scientists, this will inspire a new generation who wish to pursue a career in science.

The first edit-a-thon was held at the National Institute of Medical Research on 25th of July and was symbolic as it was held on the birthday of Rosalind Franklin whose important work on x-ray crystallography went under recognised for its significance in

Watson and Cricks discovery of the double helix. The next edit-a-thon is due to take place on 11th October at the Royal Society in London. For further information on the edit-a-thons and the timetable please visit the Equality and Diversity section on the TUS website - www.mrc-tus.org.uk. This page also has further details on women in science events and other equality issues.

Website

The TUS website has been having some problems over the last few weeks. We are in the process of having these problems resolved and expect to have the website back up and running by early September. We will be adding a new Wellbeing section to the site and the content will also have been updated across a number of pages to reflect the projects that are on-going. Visit our website at www.mrc-tus.org.uk

Terry McDonald

On behalf of the MRC Trade Unions
(BMA, FDA, PCS, UCU AND UNITE)

