Italian charity offers an alternative to the *concorsi*

[MUNICH] In the first major challenge to the centralized selection and funding of academic positions in Italy, an Italian medical research charity that raises money through a television show is to launch a series of high-level research positions.

Telethon, which predominantly funds research in genetic diseases, will put out a 12-billion-lire (US\$7.3-million) call for proposals next spring for one so-called Telethon scientist (equivalent to a full university professor), two associate Telethon scientists and seven assistant Telethon scientists. A similar call for proposals is planned each year, provided that the money raised through the annual television show continues to rise. This year Telethon raised a record IL37 billion.

Academic positions in Italian universities and public research institutes are, by law, filled through national competitions called *concorsi*. However, the *concorsi* system has been increasingly criticized for allowing personal contacts with members of the selection committees to influence some appointment decisions (see *Nature* 378, 228; 1995).

Telethon-funded posts will be selected by the charity's international scientific advisory board, which decides on the distribution of all Telethon research funds. Recent changes in the rules governing university administration have made it possible to avoid the *concorsi* system.

Each position will last for five years, and will come with generous project funding, as well as a salary nearly one-third higher than

that offered by equivalent publicly funded positions. Applicants must secure the agreement of a university department or national research institute to act as their host.

The charity hopes that a Telethon post will be considered as prestigious as that of a Howard Hughes investigator, the model on which it is based. But not all scientists are convinced that the Hughes model can be successfully transferred to the status-conscious Italian academic culture.

Piergiorgio Strata, for example, professor of neuroscience at the University of Turin and a member of Telethon's scientific advisory committee, is a strong supporter of the Telethon posts. But he worries that, despite the money and research freedom they offer, Telethon scientists may be seen as less prestigious than conventional university professors.

Andrea Ballabio, however, director of the Milan-based Telethon Institute of Genetics and Medicine (Tigem), says the Telethon initiative is needed to promote research excellence in Italy and to give talented researchers working abroad a way of returning home independently of personal contacts.

"The *concorsi* system is very bad and it has been difficult to change from the inside," he says. "It is right to try to change it through example from the outside, as Telethon is doing." It is especially important, he says, that the posts will be selected by an international committee "who won't care about Italian political games and will make judgements from a purely scientific standpoint". **Alison Abbott**

India agrees to conduct AIDS vaccine trials

[NEW DELHI] After years of hesitation, India has joined the global efforts to develop an AIDS vaccine by deciding to conduct human trials with vaccines developed either indigenously or with international collaboration. The decision, which still requires cabinet approval, was taken last Sunday (8 November) after a meeting of officials from India's National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the United Nations AIDS programme.

J. V. R. Prasada Rao, chief of NACO, announced that a core group will be formed to work out the programme's details. With assistance from NIH and the United Nations, NACO plans to set up a multi-disciplinary team to take up all aspects of AIDS vaccine research and trials.

"It will link Indian AIDS researchers with their counterparts abroad, and develop a flexible plan for producing and testing

candidate vaccines," says Vulimiri Ramalingaswami, former chief of Indian medical research, and prime mover of the vaccine initiative. Sanjay Mehendale, director of the National AIDS Research Institute in Pune, says India will be ready to launch the trials in two years.

The choice of vaccine — Indian or foreign — is a matter on which "we have to tread very carefully," says Rao. India backed out of international clinical trials nine years ago to avoid criticism that its people were being used as guinea-pigs by foreign researchers.

Rao says the vaccine should be based on virus isolates from India, and should be made available at an affordable price. A vaccine manufactured abroad must undergo phase I trial in the country of origin before use.

Carol Heilman, deputy director of NIH's AIDS programme, says her agency will help by facilitating interaction between Indian researchers and US companies. **K. S. Jayaraman**

NASA is urged to use less home grown technology

[WASHINGTON] The US space agency NASA should look more to universities and industry, and less to its own centres, to develop advanced technologies for missions, says a report from the Space Studies Board of the National Academy of Sciences.

"NASA should recognize that, when a technology important to its missions is available on the outside from academic or industrial organizations, this represents a NASA success," says the report. It was written by a committee chaired by Daniel Fink, a former aerospace industry executive and deputy director for space research at the US defence department, who now works as a private consultant.

The panel was formed at NASA's request to assess technology development in the agency's Office of Space Science. It argues that the switch to cheaper space missions has made the agency reliant on inventions that reduce spacecraft weight (and therefore launch costs) without sacrificing performance. These developments range from miniaturized instruments to lighter propulsion, power and communication systems.

The panel applauds NASA's recent decision to give responsibility for much of this technology to the space science office. But it worries that the agency is hoarding too much development work for its own centres.

Less than half of NASA's technology development funds are open to non-NASA competitors. The agency is moving towards a congressionally mandated goal of 75 per cent, but the panel sees no reason to stop there.

In deciding whether to develop a technology in-house or farm out the work, each NASA centre considers a list of its "core competencies". But the list may not be realistic. "Some centres claim that their core competencies cover an extensive range of technologies," wrote Fink's committee. "No organization that has realistic fiscal constraints can hope to be competitive or world class across such a sweep." A centre that exaggerates its abilities "will be less likely to rely on other organizations where world-class capabilities actually reside".

The panel plays down the argument that agency engineers need to keep their hand in technology development to be smarter buyers. "An organization does not need to maintain hands-on efforts to make sound decisions about acquiring goods and services from outside sources."

The committee recommends that NASA centres trim their list of "core competencies" and subject the revised lists to outside peer review. **Tony Reichhardt**