

# Privatized grief for Italian biotechnology

- Sclavo centre's poor commercial record
- DuPont link unrewarding

## London

ONE of Italy's foremost biotechnology research centres is set to close, following its sale into the private sector. The news has saddened Italian scientists working abroad, who say the closure is symptomatic of the Italian government's failure to build on its investment in science — a tendency that has led many of Italy's leading researchers to leave the country.

The Sclavo Research Centre, in Siena, Tuscany, was chosen in the early 1980s for a major investment in biotechnology, with funding from the Italian science ministry and through the state-owned chemicals company Enichem. Although attached to Sclavo SpA (a subsidiary of Enichem producing vaccines, diagnostics and blood products) the centre established a good reputation for basic research, and attracted several leading Italian molecular biologists back from posts abroad. Sclavo now has an international reputation for its work on genetically engineered whooping cough vaccines.

But Sclavo SpA, together with the research centre, was sold last month to Marcucci, an Italian pharmaceuticals and broadcasting group. Marcucci, with little interest in basic research, says the research centre will be closed. Marialuisa Melli, who joined the centre in 1984 from the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, says that most of the 80 research staff expect to be made redundant later this month. The Sclavo staff have appealed to the Italian president, Francesco Cossiga, to intervene, asking for the centre to be brought back into the public sector, and run as a government laboratory.

Franco Celada, an immunologist now at New York University, describes the Sclavo centre's closure as "heartbreaking". He says that Italian science spending has been hampered by the government's regional policy, with continual attempts to establish research institutes in the impoverished south of the country, most of which have failed. At the same time, successful laboratories have suffered through lack of continued funding.

Celada says the situation is compounded by Italian industry's short-sighted view of research spending. "It seemed that Sclavo was the exception", Celada says, having built up a large and successful research group, but the usual Italian pattern has now prevailed. He notes that the closure coincides with plans

to start up seven new research institutes, including two in Sardinia, with research interests very similar to Sclavo's.

Renato Baserga, at Temple University in Philadelphia, says that most Italian scientists working abroad want to return, but the vagaries of Italian science policy are a disincentive. Apart from the problems of government intervention to satisfy regional policy, a "suffocating" bureaucracy surrounds the supply of reagents and equipment, he says.

Melli fears that if the Italian government does not act quickly, it will not be possible to prevent the centre's demise. Many of Sclavo's leading workers are likely to receive other job offers, and research teams will be broken up.

The research centre's current plight is the result of the poor commercial performance of Sclavo SpA. Amanda Maxwell, from the trade journal *Clinica* describes the company's recent history as "a real minefield". US Pharmaceuticals giant DuPont took a 50 per cent stake in Sclavo SpA in early 1988. But the joint venture with Enichem (which subsequently evolved into Enimont) disintegrated amid acrimonious exchanges, as Sclavo SpA's profits tumbled.

Enimont said DuPont had not satisfied arrangements for technology transfer, while DuPont said Enimont managers had been unwilling to bring joint projects to

## HUMAN GENE THERAPY

### Anticancer trial's surprise approval

#### Washington

A PROPOSAL to treat terminally ill cancer patients with human gene therapy was approved with unexpected rapidity last week by the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). A few hurdles still remain — the experiment must be approved by the NIH director and the US Food and Drug Administration — but are expected to be jumped without difficulty. Principal researcher Steven A. Rosenberg of the National Cancer Institute says clinical trials could begin within days of receiving final approval. He believes RAC took the unusual step of approving the experiment on first examination because it will treat patients with skin cancer who have failed to respond to standard cancer therapies.

The proposal follows on from Rosenberg's earlier gene transfer experiments, which began in May 1989. Tumour-infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs) — cells with antitumour activity — were isolated from a patient's tumour, marked with a gene for neomycin resistance and readministered to the patient. The gene was not intended to confer any therapeutic benefit but simply to allow Rosenberg to track the TILs and show that they homed in on the tumour in the patient's body.

### Under-cover advice

#### London

THE annual advice to the UK Department of Education and Science (DES) from the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) on requirements for the DES science budget, will no longer be published. Secretary of State for Education and Science John MacGregor said the change brings the ABRC's advice in line with that from the higher education funding councils.

The ABRC's advice on the science budget has been published since 1982, an isolated instance of public access in the web of secrecy surrounding the annual review of British public expenditure. In future, ABRC is expected to publish a more general document, outlining priorities for British science.

Peter Aldous  
 ■ Michael Fallon did not, as was expected, take over Robert Jackson's responsibilities for science and higher education in the recent ministerial reshuffle. The new science minister is Alan Howarth, previously DES minister for schools.

fruition. DuPont eventually sold its stake back to Enimont in June this year. But this proved to be a temporary measure, ended by the Marcucci deal.

As *Nature* went to press, it emerged that the San Raffaele hospital in Milan has expressed an interest in the Sclavo research centre. San Raffaele is planning an expansion of its research in biotechnology. Melli says that Sclavo researchers will meet San Raffaele representatives this week, but the precise nature of the hospital's proposals are not yet known.

Peter Aldous

Now Rosenberg intends to use TILs as vehicles to deliver to the tumour site molecules that may help destroy the tumour. He will insert the gene coding for tumour necrosis factor (TNF) — a molecule that has been shown to cause cancers to regress in mice — into TILs in the hope that they will produce enough TNF at the tumour site to cause tumour regression.

Expressing surprise at all the attention being paid to the approval of his human gene therapy experiment, Rosenberg says "it is important only if it works".

Diane Gershon