Scientists protest at 'clean' appointments

Munich. Scientists at southern Italy's largest cancer centre, the Pascale National Cancer Institute in Naples, are planning a strike this week in protest at the shortcomings of a new administration imposed on them by Mariapia Garavaglia, health minister in Italy's interim anti-corruption government.

In particular, the scientists claim that the new administrative director, Giovanni Forte, lacks the scientific or administrative experience required to run the institute effectively.

Their protests are being backed by Enzo Mattina, the local representative in the European Parliament, who has called for Garavaglia's resignation on the grounds that Forte's appointment was the result of political favouritism rather than merit or skill.

The dispute at the institute follows charges against the previous administrators of the institute, accused of the now familiar crime of *tangentopoli* — taking cuts on contracts for the purchase of new equipment.

Suspected of close links with the former health minister and Christian Democrat Francesco DeLorenzo — now charged with operating a ring of corruption centred on the ministry (see *Nature* 364, 663; 1993) — the institute's administration was dismissed in its entirety in July by Garavaglia.

But Mattina claims that Forte's subsequent appointment was strongly influenced

by his own strong links with Italy's interior minister Nicola Mancino. The two come from the same small town in the mountains of the Campania region, of which Naples is capital. And Garavaglia and Mancino are in the same faction of the Christian Democrat party, implying a close working relationship between them.

The Pascale institute is the region's central cancer clinic, with 400 beds and at least 6,000 outpatients at any time. Its research facilities house 50 basic research scientists and 80 clinical research scientists.

Scientists at the institute have welcomed the government's anti-corruption drive. But since the arrival of Forte, they claim that the institute has not been functioning properly. For example, they say, requests for laboratory supplies are not being passed on by the administration. According to Giuseppe Castello, a clinical immunologist, grants from the European Communities have been received but cannot be spent.

Two months ago, the ministry of health, which funds the institute's research facilities, promised to double the number of basic scientists. But the promise has yet to be met, as the administration has not allowed the new positions to be advertised.

On the clinical side, requests for new supplies of drugs have been held up for so

long that stocks were expected to last only until the end of October. After an emergency meeting in Rome last week between Garavaglia, Forte and Marcos Salvatori, director of the Pascale Institute, a way has been found of buying in new stocks.

But routine cancer preventive measures, such as cervical smears, may still have to be suspended. Garavaglia has asked scientists at the institute for patience, claiming that the extent of change needed in Italy has slowed down the process of reform.

Part of the problem is that the ministry has responsibility only for the research side of the institute. In contrast, the clinical side is funded by the local authorities of the Campania region. And communication between the two has broken down. But according to staff at the institute, the main problem is Forte's lack of personal experience, and the difficulties that this has caused for the administrative staff working under him.

Scientists at the Pascale Institute have also found it frustrating that they have to negotiate with staff within the ministry who have not changed since DeLorenzo's demise. Government officials have been unable to comment either on the scientists' complaint of mismanagement, or on Mattina's charges of political favouritism.

Alison Abbott

Brain institute falls victim to war in ex-Yugoslavia

Zagreb. The construction of what was to have been the first large-scale science project in Croatia — the Croatian Institute for Brain Research (CIBR) in Zagreb — has been temporarily abandoned because the country's science budget has been exhausted by the war in ex-Yugoslavia.

The institute is the brainchild of Ivica Kostović, dean of the medical faculty at the University of Zagreb. It had been promised \$2 million by the Croatian Ministry of Science when the ministry was set up in 1990, and presented as the country's contribution to the European Decade of the Brain (see *Nature* 359, 200; 1992).

But all government support has now been withdrawn, and the skeleton of the 7,500 square metre building, originally planned to be opened in 1991 with 170 scientists, stands abandoned.

Construction work is unlikely to begin again in the near future. Zdenko Kovac, Croatia's deputy science minister, says that the sixfold decline in the science budget over the past three years means that the institute will have to seek support from private sources, at least until the Croatian economy picks up. But requests for endowments have so far been unsuccessful.

The CIBR's scientific programme, drawn

Building work at Zagreb's Institute for Brain Research is at a standstill.

up in 1990 by Croatian neuroscientists working both in the country and abroad, was to have focused on the neurobiological aspects of the development and ageing of the human brain, in particular the evolution of Alzheimer's disease and other degenerative disorders. The institute was to have housed the medical school's extensive collection of neurological samples taken from embryos, as well as its brain bank.

An international scientific advisory board, which included many expatriate Croatians now working in the United States, was set up in 1990 to evaluate all scientific proposals.

Unusually for Croatia, the institute's planned board of trustees was to have been made up of both foreign scientists and representatives of local governmental bodies.

The shattering of hopes for modern facilities has been devastating for those who had been planning to work there. "When the institute is finally set up there may be no scientists left to work in it", says Kostović, director of CIBR's scientific programme. "We are finding it hard to prevent young scientists from going abroad."

Kostović, who has continued to produce a steady flow of scientific publications despite the war, remains optimistic about the institute's prospects. He still hopes that one floor will be leased to companies wanting modern research facilities with access both to preclinical research in the institute and to Zagreb's neighbouring clinics. Kostović believes such sponsors can be found, and predicts a new opening date of May 1995 for the institute.

But Heiko Braak, a member of the advisory board from the Goethe University in Frankfurt, feels the optimism to be misplaced. Braak says that he has long been ready to provide antibodies for CIBR's research, but now thinks it unlikely that they will be asked for.

Robert Unterhuber