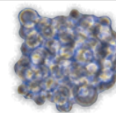


# THIS WEEK

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## Struggle for independence

*The faculty of the Scripps Research Institute is bucking a national trend with its refusal to merge with the University of Southern California.*

Remarkable events are unfolding at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, where faculty members have rebelled against their president's attempts to merge with the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles. These struggles are emblematic of today's difficult landscape for independent biomedical research institutes in the United States. Highly dependent on funding from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), many independents have closed or merged with larger institutions (see *Nature* **491**, 510; 2012), and Scripps president Michael Marletta wanted his centre to join that trend. In June, news leaked that Marletta had brokered a potential deal that would have seen USC pay Scripps US\$600 million so that the two institutions could join up.

But in an interesting departure from the script, Scripps faculty members have said no to the deal, have argued against its entire basis and have now taken matters into their own hands. As we report on page 274, they have passed a vote of no confidence in Marletta by a startling margin — almost unanimously. They say that they can solve Scripps' financial crisis without his help, thank you very much, and can do so without selling out the institution that they love. Are they right? Other labs are watching with interest.

The impasse is a product of clashing views on Scripps, a prestigious independent institute that regularly attracts more than \$300 million a year in NIH funding — upwards of 80% of the institute's operating budget. A sizeable chunk of the rest has tended to come from the pharmaceutical industry, but that has declined sharply in recent years, leaving the institute with a projected \$21-million budget gap for this fiscal year.

But where Marletta sees this deficit as a problem necessitating a change in how Scripps does business, faculty members claim that it is a temporary setback, not an existential threat, and one that should be solved without changing the nature of their institute. They fear that a merger with USC would compromise their cherished independence — many point out that although they would get more job security at larger institutions, they have chosen to work at Scripps because its small size and non-hierarchical nature free them from administrative burdens and teaching that would distract them from science. And they are angry at Marletta's decision to negotiate the USC deal in secret, feeling that as Scripps' main breadwinners, they deserved to know much earlier that he was even considering such a move.

The closed-door negotiations have raised suspicions among faculty members that Marletta does not understand their priorities — or worse, that he does not share them. They think that the \$600 million he agreed to, which was to be meted out in \$15-million increments over 40 years, was a vast undervaluing of Scripps assets, including its formidable grant money, sizeable investments and coveted seaside location. To many, the deal felt like a land grab by USC, which would have paid a bargain rate for scientific prestige, a valuable piece of land

and a southern foothold for its health-care practice.

The whole episode has cemented the faculty members' growing mistrust of Marletta, who has been president of Scripps since January 2012; previously, he was chair of the chemistry department at the University of California, Berkeley. Many at Scripps, including Marletta himself, feel that philanthropy could plug the institution's budget gap. But the president has brought in no major donations during his term. By contrast, the Sanford–Burnham and Salk biomedical-research institutes, also in La Jolla, have each raised hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years. Scripps faculty members say that there is clearly donor money available in their wealthy area, and Scripps could do more to access it, perhaps by accentuating its strengths in chemistry and chemical biology.

How the institution will get itself out of this situation is not clear. The faculty members think that they can find a way to close the budget gap by themselves and are determined to try. It would certainly prove a coup. But they would also benefit from having a full-time leader whose entire job is focused on their future.

Whether Marletta is this person is currently up for debate. It would probably be in the best interests of everyone at Scripps if he could find a way to demonstrate to the faculty members that he has heard their concerns and will change his approach. If he can do that, Scripps will be more likely to buck the trend of small institutes succumbing to their budget woes. ■

**“Faculty members think that they can find a way to close the budget gap by themselves, and are determined to try.”**

## Within reach

*A redoubling of efforts should swiftly eradicate polio from its last strongholds.*

The global effort to eradicate poliomyelitis has been spectacularly successful, eliminating 99% of cases in its 26-year history. But that progress has begun to unravel in the past 18 months, with outbreaks in east and west Africa and in the Middle East. The lesson is clear: as long as the virus is allowed to persist in the three countries in which it remains endemic — Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria — exports of the disease will continue to affect other countries. A determined effort is needed to eradicate the virus from these endemic countries, and fast.

The worsening situation meant that in May, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared polio a public-health emergency of

international concern. This allowed it to impose a requirement that all travellers entering or leaving Pakistan, Cameroon, Syria and Equatorial Guinea — the countries currently exporting polio — must have up-to-date polio vaccinations. And it strongly recommended the same for other nations with ongoing polio outbreaks. The WHO also requires the governments of affected countries to declare that polio constitutes a national public-health emergency.

It is too soon to tell how well countries will enforce the travel restrictions or how effective they will be (see page 285). But the WHO's declaration has another, and arguably more important, potential impact. It has greatly heightened public and political awareness of the global polio threat. The move could yet shame those nations with weak control efforts into doing better. Ultimately, political will, through every level of government right down to the local level, is crucial if eradication efforts are to succeed.

The setbacks have reignited scepticism among some critics of the multibillion-dollar global effort, which has repeatedly missed its own deadlines for worldwide eradication — the first such deadline was set for 2000. But this must not obscure the fact that impressive gains have been made, so much so that at the end of 2012, global polio eradication truly seemed within reach. It is important to turn the current situation around quickly, consolidate those gains, and condemn polio to the history books.

There is cause for optimism. In Afghanistan, the virus has been wiped out from many areas where it was previously rampant, with cases now restricted mostly to the northeast, where polio is imported from across the border with Pakistan. Afghanistan is expected to become polio-free perhaps as soon as year's end. Nigeria has also improved its eradication efforts, resulting in a sharp drop in case numbers. Eradication there is in sight, although a current worsening of the country's political and security tensions risks undoing the progress. Pakistan, despite a lacklustre control effort, has also shrunk the geographical range of the virus.

The global-eradication effort — despite some shortcomings — has a good track record of successfully fighting sporadic flare-ups. There is every reason to believe that the current spate of outbreaks will be contained (although war-torn Syria could remain problematic).

The big challenge is to conquer the virus in the endemic countries that are fuelling exports of the disease — and above all in Pakistan. A report released in May by the Independent Monitoring Board of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative puts it bluntly: "Pakistan's situation is dire. Its program is years behind the other endemic countries." Unless matters change, the report concludes, the country is "firmly on track to be the last polio-endemic country in the world".

That damning indictment needs to be heard and responded to at every level of Pakistani society. The country faces many obstacles — but so too did the other countries that nonetheless have succeeded in eradicating polio. There is no excuse for Pakistan not to do so. Its government must pull out all the stops to act swiftly and decisively. As the report rightfully argues, ultimate responsibility for Pakistan's bungled polio efforts lies with its authorities: "If the country's leaders were to truly and wholly take on the mission of wiping polio from their borders, what now seems to some an impossible dream would fast become reality."

Another barrier to eradication is societal resistance to vaccination, rooted, for example, in local distrust of immunization campaigns and unfounded concerns that it conflicts with religious beliefs. Polio has spread to Waziristan in northern Pakistan, a stronghold of the Taliban, who have banned vaccinations. Vaccinators have also been murdered.

In the past few months, international Islamic scholars and bodies — including the newly formed Islamic Advisory Group on Polio Eradication — have to their credit spoken out to condemn attacks on polio workers, and to emphasize that polio vaccination is compatible with Islam, denouncing those who claim otherwise. Resistance and suspicion of vaccines will always be present, but religious leaders can help by reiterating these messages to local populations.

Pakistan's situation is exacerbated by the Taliban's stubborn blocking of polio vaccinations, ostensibly in opposition to US drone strikes. But polio has no religion. It respects no political affiliation. For the benefit of all, every effort must be made to overcome residual resistance to vaccination and to root out the virus from its last strongholds. ■

**"Ultimate responsibility for Pakistan's bungled polio efforts lies with its authorities."**

## Food for thought

*Researchers investigating different farming practices should not have to pick sides.*

Some debates run and run. Last month, an analysis found that a selection of organically farmed food contained, on average, higher concentrations of supposedly beneficial antioxidant compounds than food produced by conventional farming (M. Barański *et al.* *Br. J. Nutr.* <http://doi.org/tqs; 2014>).

This field is still relatively small and the quality of research can be variable. The analysis advances previous work, thoroughly evaluates the current situation and yields some results that warrant further investigation. Still, several prominent nutrition scientists have voiced valid criticisms of the paper's method and statistical analysis (see [go.nature.com/ikx15z](http://go.nature.com/ikx15z)), and have raised concerns over the scientific rigour of some of the primary research that it covers.

It is good to be thorough: the study examines all of the available evidence so far. But in a field in which research quality can be hit and miss, it can be better to be cautious. The authors would perhaps have generated more confidence in their results if they had been more selective. But such selection, inevitably, raises questions about how it is done.

Beyond the arguments about this specific study, which the authors have defended, lies a bigger issue. There are some fundamental

questions that this type of research cannot answer, despite the way the results have been interpreted by the mainstream media as pointing to clear benefits of organic farming.

The study attempts to examine how different farming methods affect the nutritional quality of the product — an important question. There is plenty of room for improvement in the conventional farming system and in the nutritional quality of many people's diets. So far, so good.

The paper also refers to the link between increased dietary concentrations of antioxidant compounds, such as phenolic acids and flavonols, and a reduced risk of chronic diseases — including some cancers. However, the evidence for such a link is mixed, and tentative at best. A more important question is not the level of antioxidants in organic or non-organic food, but how that contributes to health.

It is also not clear that organic farming practices are the cause of the observed higher concentrations of antioxidants. Research could help to determine, for example, whether organic crops — which are not treated with pesticides — release more phenolic compounds as a defence against pests and pathogens. Or perhaps the nitrogen fertilizers applied to conventional crops encourage growth rather than the production of such chemical defences.

This is a useful discussion, but difficult to have on neutral territory. Research on the different farming systems can often seem like a contest in which one practice is pitted against another and in which researchers must pick sides. Science should stay focused on the heart of the matter: the provision of more nutritious food for more people in a more sustainable way. ■

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