

Amidst scientific unrest, France mulls an institutional alliance

The French government last month announced a new alliance among several major scientific institutes as part of its proposed strategy to overhaul the country's current national research system. The proposal paves the way for the possible creation of a single linking institution: the National Alliance for Life and Health Sciences (Alliance nationale pour les sciences de la vie et de la santé).

The proposed changes come amidst a period of uncertainty in France, as many scientists remain deeply concerned about the future of the country's research after a series of sweeping policy reforms that have led to palpable changes in terms of funding.

Over the past few years, the two leading organizations responsible for most of the biomedical funding, the Center for National Scientific Research (CNRS) and the National Institute of Health and Biomedical Research (INSERM), have become increasingly less influential, with the more recently established National Research Agency (ANR)—which functions more as an administrative agency than as a scientific research body—gaining increased control over funding.

Many scientists fear the government is developing a research agenda that is too heavily focused on research with immediate real-world applications at the expense of research for the sake of knowledge. They worry that a lack of support for basic experiments will translate into missed breakthroughs in areas such as biomedicine. “Nobody knows where the next innovation is going to come from,” says Isabelle This-Saint-Jean, president of Sauvons la Recherche, a researchers' movement initiated in 2004.

Biologist Alain Trautmann, founder of the movement and its former spokesperson, told *Nature Medicine* in an email that the medical community is lobbying hard for the creation of a new single institution such as the proposed National Alliance for Life and Health Sciences. Although Trautmann is not entirely opposed to the idea of creating this type of institution, he says that pressure from the medical lobby to increase the emphasis on translational research could leave funding for the basic sciences dry.

The eight institutional research organizations joining forces in this combined alliance would include CNRS, INSERM and the Institut Pasteur, among several others. The initiative is largely based on recommendations from a report by Elias Zerhouni, former director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), whom the French government sought for advice on how to best restructure its national



Signs of change: French scientists have voiced discontent with recent restructuring

scientific biomedical agencies to make them more efficient.

Jean-François Bach, an immunologist and physician who serves as a secretary of the French Academy of Sciences, was one of a dozen members to take part in an advisory committee. The major motivation behind the new alliance is to improve coordination among the “many scattered institutes” and remove some of the bureaucratic redundancy resulting from having two main biomedical organizations, INSERM and CNRS, says Bach.

Meanwhile, academic scientists across France have voiced concerns about impending laws that seek to shift more power from national

research institutions to local universities. A statute in the proposed reforms would give university presidents direct control over the number of hours that scientists dedicate to teaching as opposed to research. This, combined with the funding changes already underway, has led to demonstrations by professors across France for the first time.

Those who participated in the protests have objected to what they see as a general lack of transparency in the development of the policy reforms and the fact that there was no official scientific board involved—with input from the scientific community from only selected individuals.

Karen Dente, Paris

New animal directive moves forward

European politicians have altered key provisions in draft legislation that will eventually govern all animal experiments in the EU.

The European Parliament's agriculture committee voted on 31 March to amend many of the rules that had most worried academic and industry groups when the first draft of a new Europe-wide directive was unveiled last year.

Researchers had previously warned the rules put forth in the first draft would increase costs and bureaucracy without any commensurate gains in animal welfare. Those working with nonhuman primates also worried the new directive would shut down much of their work, as it contained a provision against primate work not related to “life-threatening or debilitating clinical conditions” in humans (see *Nat. Med.* 14, 1293; 2008).

However, the agriculture committee voted 19 to 7, with three abstentions, to approve amendments allowing nonhuman primate work in all areas of medical research. The committee also made reuse of animals easier and moved to “prevent red tape, which would bring little benefit in terms of animal welfare,” it said in a statement.

As *Nature Medicine* went to press, a vote by the European Parliament on the amended directive was expected at the start of May. After the vote, the European Commission and the European Council both have their say before the parliament votes again.

Antivivisectionist groups have accused the agriculture committee of bowing to pressure from industry and research groups and vowed to attempt to reverse changes in May.

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