

Public health in Italy

SIR—The Italian Chamber of Deputies has recently approved and forwarded to the Senate a bill to 'reform' the Servizio Sanitario Nazionale (SSN, the Italian National Health Service). The bill confirms the status of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS, the Italian National Institute of Health) as a "technical-scientific body of SSN" under the authority of the Minister of Health. It also prescribes that regulations should be rewritten so as to endow ISS with "scientific, organizational, financial and book-keeping autonomy". This is obviously a positive decision. ISS, which is well known internationally, is responsible for basic and applied research in biomedicine and public health as well as a host of advisory and regulatory activities. Many of these tasks require a rigorous code for dealing with possible conflicts of interest, both between different public organizations and between public and private special-interest groups.

The hard truth, however, is that the resources allocated by the state budget to ISS for the performance of its increasing duties have become less and less adequate. The figures speak for themselves. With a permanent (tenured) staff of about 1,450, including about 260 scientists and almost 100 directors of research, the total resources each year are at present about L85,000 million (about £38 million or \$74 million). This allocation is intended to cover the salaries and related expenses of tenured personnel (about two thirds of the total) and all other expenses, except two special projects (AIDS and tumour therapy).

In such a situation, there has been an escalation in the chase for "extra-budget" resources earmarked for research agreed with the contracting parties. Under present laws, these agreements can be made with Italian public institutions (for example, the National Research Council and the regional authorities), with foreign organizations (National Institutes of Health) and with international organizations (World Health Organisation, European Communities). The total additional resources acquired in this way are now about L40,000 million a year. Much of this money supports on a temporary basis more than 500 junior scientists and technicians, better known as "the precarious ones" (*i precari*).

The next step in this fight for survival is the attempt to modify the law so as to allow ISS to strike similar bargains with private groups. After considerable controversy, an *ad hoc* provision has been included in the bill approved by the Chamber of Deputies, to become law if the Senate agrees. In an institution such as ours, conflict-of-interest rules would often

be violated under such an arrangement.

On the other hand, it is widely known (and officially acknowledged) that our health services waste many of their resources each year through sloppy management, satisfying customers, prescription of costly medicines of unproven therapeutic value and over-prescription or misprescription of equally costly medicines. Our Treasury continues year after year to show that it is incapable of recovering losses due to fiscal evasion, while our public debt continues to increase.

At this point, scientists will draw the sad conclusion that public institutions endowed with adequate scientific know-how and with sufficient freedom to speak out on important issues without strings are not wanted on the Italian scene.

On 31 October, the *ad hoc* Senate Committee preliminarily approved an additional clause in the bill, specifying that the SSN should earmark for biomedical and public health research not less than one per cent of its total budget. At the present level of expense, this means not less than L600,000 million per year (about £270 million or \$520 million). If this provision is confirmed, and if objective criteria are adopted for partitioning the funds between ISS and other institutions, we might at last be able to rely on a regular source of financing for research, in addition to other sources covering fixed expenses.

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SIR—I was saddened to read the letter of the four professors from the University of Rome (*Nature* 345, 658; 1990), and the subsequent correspondence. I cannot but agree with the issues put forward in the first letter, and in that published in *Nature* 347, 325; 1990. As a young Italian physician who has gone abroad to obtain clinical experience and the opportunity to carry out less parochial research, I cannot understand Cattani's attitude towards publishing in a language more widely read than Italian, considering that he himself publishes widely in English. Most Italian journals are not listed in the *Index Medicus*, many do not practise peer review and, when an abstract in English is presented, it is seldom translated accurately.

A clinical associate professor has plenty of clinical duties, but even though by law it is not allowed, private medical practice constitutes the bulk of a professor's work load, and provides a handsome income, often several times greater than that earned from the university appointment.

Finally, the letter by Drs Borgia, Daga and Martinuzzi (*Nature* 347, 325; 1990) points out the problems faced by young biomedical researchers working as post-graduate and postdoctoral clinical fellows,

possibly in teaching and senior positions, when trying to return home. We are generally regarded as a threat to the heads of department, who fear that our track record may displace them from the limelight, or endanger the chances of their own relatives obtaining a position, if we are judged fairly. We are a precious asset to be regarded dearly, as we are used to looking at things critically, and have been training hard to increase our ability to perform research while on the typical clinical commitments of, for example, the British medical system, where a week of 100-plus working hours is regarded as normal.

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Heavenly hosts

SIR—In the attempt to save certain species from extinction, for example the California condor, the black-footed ferret and so on, how much attention is being given to their natural parasites?

When all of the last remaining members of a species are taken into captivity, they may lose their parasites, either by the drastic change in living conditions, by treatment from zoo veterinarians or by generations of captive breeding. When they, or their offspring, are then released back to the wild, will they be able to become reinfected? Some parasites are quite host-specific in the wild and may indeed become extinct when their natural hosts are gone.

"So what?" may be a typical reaction. But, if our goal is to conserve biological diversity, then indeed all species should be considered, not just those with the most outward appeal. Many hosts evolved or, better still, co-evolved with their parasitic burden. Perhaps they deserve each other.

Equal rights for parasites!

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Doing it wrong

SIR—It is becoming increasingly difficult to communicate scientific ideas in a form that allows them to be readily understood. Take, for example, the peer report on a manuscript submitted by us to an international journal. "The manuscript is written in a relaxed, conversational style that leads the reader to feel uncertain concerning the rigor with which the experiments were performed." On the one hand, scientists are being urged to report their work in a way which is more universally accessible. On the other . . .

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