Italian promotions defended . . .

SIR — The letter by G.F. Gaetani and A. M. Ferraris (*Nature* 353, 10; 1991) engendered a violent press campaign by some Italian newspapers, following which the Minister of University and Scientific Research and Technology ordered an inquiry into the proceedings of the committee and its decisions regarding the professorship in question.

As members of that committee, we feel it is now time to provide further information, as the inquiry has now been concluded and has given full approval to both our proceedings and our decisions.

We shall not comment upon the methods used by Gaetani — one of the "losers", as he says — to influence his own academic promotion, neither shall we comment upon the evaluation of the different applicants. But we wish to make it clear that a competition for appointment as a university professor is quite different from academic competitions for scientific awards.

Research work and results are undoubtedly very important in evaluating candidates for professorial positions in a school of medicine. But as regards clinical teaching in haematology, the activity of an applicant needs to be evaluated also in terms of clinical and professional ability, as the basic duty and responsibility of a professor is to teach students how to diagnose and treat a disease and how to care for patients. Such fundamental aspects of the problem should not be ignored.

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. . . and attacked

SIR — Promotion to a full professorship in paediatrics in Italian medical schools seems to suffer from more serious problems than does a similar appointment in haematology¹. A committee of five full professors of paediatrics, after three years of discussion and the replacement of two of its members, has just appointed 25 new professors from among 74 candidates².

The explanation put forward by Gaetani and Ferraris¹ for haematology candidates seems to apply in an even more extreme sense here. Of the paediatrics candidates, five of the winners averaged 2.2 winners in the *Science Citation Index* (two having published no papers in international journals) whereas five of the

losers averaged 103, with a remarkable peak of 302.

The Minister for University Affairs decided not to validate these results and the same committee was asked to reconsider the same list of candidates. After two months, the results were confirmed. After a further three months, the National University Council (CUN) is to confirm the appointment of 24 new professors, casting doubts on only one of the five candidates with few citations. This means that the minister must now either accept the decision on the 24 winners or appoint a completely new committee to reconsider all 74 candidates.

It is not our intention to criticize the Italian system of academic promotion in general; it provides good results in many fields of pure science, including physics, where Italian work is well established internationally. But although scientific output should not, of course, be the only criterion for academic promotion, there should be a threshold below which no candidate is acceptable.

The case of the paediatrics professorships is not an isolated one, and may indicate systematic nepotism in the management of appointments to clinical professorships in Italian medical schools: candidates for paediatrics professorships, ten are *allievi* (pupils is not an adequate translation) of the five members of the committee, and all of them were appointed.

The main problem is that decision-making committees and university officials are not held responsible for their mistakes. Substantial portions of research grants and all new academic posts are distributed among universities, faculties and departments without consideration for the quality of their science or their teaching. This is not the situation elsewhere in Europe or in the United States. As a consequence, Italian departments and institutes have no incentive for high standards of science, and the appointment of the best scientists and scholars is not encouraged.

We should like in conclusion to suggest that the Italian system of academic promotion be changed to follow more closely the criteria used in other European universities. The departments concerned should be responsible for specifying the scientific and academic requirements for a vacant position and should be allowed to nominate at least three candidates. All the candidates, who need not be Italian, should submit their *curricula vitae* and reprints of their best publications to an international panel of referees. The committee should then say (1) whether at least three candidates meet the scientific and academic threshold qualification and

(2) who among the candidates best meets the department's requirements.

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1. Gaetani, G. F. & Ferraris, A. M. *Nature* 353, 10 (1991).

2. Aiuti, F., Baroni, C., Cao, A. & Fantoni, A. *Lancet* ii, 1387 (1991).

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SIR — Further to your continuing correspondence on Italian academic appointments, I wish to describe what seems to be an entirely novel way of constituting the commissions that evaluate applicants for tenured academic positions. My story also illustrates the remarkable flexibility now required of those eventually appointed.

Some time ago, the physics department of this small university in central Italy announced a vacancy for an associate professor in atmospheric physics; we have an active group in stratospheric modelling and measurement involved in several international research programmes. The several active workers in this field are concentrated at three or four universities, but in the whole of Italy there are only one full professor and one associate professor of atmospheric physics and one associate professor of meteorology.

On this occasion, an entirely novel way of choosing the evaluation commission was devised. For these purposes, all disciplines are grouped together on the basis of some kind of affinity; the subgroup including atmospheric physics (D043) is entitled Atmospheric Physics, Oceanography and Navigation, and belongs to the major grouping of Earth Sciences (not physics), including such subgroups as General and Spherical Astronomy, Terrestrial Physics and Limnology.

The evaluation commission was chosen in two steps; first, a pool of potential members was chosen by lot from among all professors and associate professors in the Earth sciences, after which the same people voted to elect a subset from the pool. It is useless to speculate about who invented this system, but the effect is evidently to favour the large schools, in this case professors of terrestrial physics, who happen to be concentrated in a few universities.

Even if the lottery were above board (which nobody believes), the result would have been that candidates would probably have been from the same large schools, whose votes then ensure the