

Cancer agency denies mismanagement

Paris. Allegations of serious anomalies in the running of France's largest medical charity, L'Association pour la recherche sur le Cancer (ARC), have reopened a debate about the role of medical charities in the financing of research.

The allegations are contained in a letter written in 1991 by Michel Lucas, director of the Inspection Générale des Affaires Sociales (IGAS), to Claude Levin, then minister of social affairs and solidarity, outlining the preliminary findings of an investigation of ARC in 1990.

The letter, which has now been leaked to the press, has no official status, as an administrative tribunal 'annulled' the investigation two months after it had begun. The court upheld a complaint by ARC's president, Jacques Crozemarie, that IGAS — which is responsible for investigating public authorities — had no right to investigate private associations.

The allegations include a claim that ARC spent 65.5 per cent of its FF430-million (US\$80-million) income in 1989 on "running costs". ARC's income in 1993, FF581.2 million, is around five times the combined spending (excluding salaries) on cancer research by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the biomedical research organization, INSERM, over the same period.

Lucas's letter also claims that most of these running costs were paid exclusively to three public relations companies, that shared the same management. As a result, it concludes, much of the money collected by ARC was used to "finance the development of external commercial companies".

Lucas describes the advertising campaigns used by ARC to encourage donations as "contestable" (the last issue of ARC's magazine *Fondamental* provides potential donors with a ready-made last will and testament). And his letter also accuses ARC of extravagance, for example in inviting 36 French journalists for a week in China for a three-day 'symposium'.

ARC's board of directors is criticized for failing to exercise proper control over ARC's activities. Moreover, although ARC distributes research funds through scientific peer-review committees, the letter alleges that many board members were "privileged" recipients of grants, and that the board failed to control the use of an "emergency" research fund — around FF20 million — spent at the "discretion" of Crozemarie.

Crozemarie denies the allegations, claiming that IGAS wanted to "destroy" the association "for political reasons". The investigatory body overestimated ARC's running costs, he argues, by including activities in "prevention and information".

Dominique Bellet, director of the immunochemistry laboratory at the Institut Gustave Roussy at Villejuif near Paris and a member of the ARC board, also denies the allegations, pointing out that the board also includes representatives of CNRS, INSERM and government ministries. ARC paid Bellet FF16 million to set up his laboratory, and pays up to 40 per cent of its running costs.

Reaction in the research community to the letter has been mixed. One widely held view is whatever the validity of the allegations, ARC has inevitably come under suspicion because it has not been sufficiently

open about how it spends its money.

Another concern is that the adverse publicity could provoke a public backlash against medical charities, upon whom many public laboratories depend heavily for support. This concern is shared by Philippe Douste-Blazy, the junior health minister, who last week called for "absolute transparency" in the management of medical charities.

The first test of the public's reaction came last week when the French Muscular Dystrophy Association (AFM) held its annual Téléthon to raise funds for genetics research. Television personalities, apparently concerned about the implications of the allegations against ARC, assured the public of AFM's accountability, and the pledges received broke last year's record.

Many scientists say they are reserving judgement until the findings of a six-month investigation of ARC by the national audit commission are released later this month. Crozemarie says he is convinced the report will exonerate ARC.

Declan Butler

Officials concede US fusion is 'stuck'

Washington. The US fusion energy research programme has no money to meet its goals, government officials told a group of advisers in an unusually blunt assessment of the \$360 million-a-year programme's prospects.

"We're stuck, frankly," Anne Davies, associate director for fusion energy at the Department of Energy, told the first meeting of a re-modelled Fusion Energy Advisory Committee (FEAC) last week. "We are faced with restructuring the whole programme. We haven't done it yet, and I don't know what it's going to look like."

Over the next five years, the United States wants to fund the Tokamak Physics Experiment (TPX) at the Princeton Particle Physics Laboratory in New Jersey, to participate fully in the International Thermal Experimental Reactor (ITER) with Russia, Europe and Japan, and to maintain a \$220-million basic research programme.

But in presentations to FEAC, Davies and Charles Curtis, the under-secretary for energy, said that the programme could expect no more than continued funding at the existing level. "The implication is that when TPX peaks, it will force down the base programme to \$112 million," said Curtis.

Congress has yet to approve construction of TPX or ITER. "I think it is a very serious question whether Congress will make either investment," Curtis said. He also suggested that earlier Republican proposals to halve the fusion budget were being taken very seriously in the department.

Colin Macilwain

AIDS summit promises left hanging

Paris. Leading politicians from 42 countries, including a handful of heads of state, met in Paris last week to make impassioned speeches on the need for 'solidarity' in the fight against AIDS. They then went home, leaving the question of how much talk will be translated into action.

The leaders signed a declaration committing them to provide resources for seven 'concrete' programmes: to reduce HIV infection of children, reduce the vulnerability of women, improve blood safety, support community associations, reinforce healthcare facilities for AIDS patients, strengthen human rights, and promote 'global collaboration' on research.

Activist groups protested outside the meeting, and called for an end to discriminatory laws. Donna Shalala, the US secretary of state for health, said it could take one to two years before the United States'

ban on seropositives entering the country is lifted. Russia, whose parliament last month approved compulsory HIV screening of foreigners, was reported as saying that it would review this decision.

Meanwhile, Paris marked AIDS day by placing an illuminated red ribbon (above) 40 metres high on the Eiffel Tower. All entrance fees to the tower on 1 and 2 December went to AIDS associations.

D. B.

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