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How not to be charitable

A scandal in France reveals that large sums of money intended for cancer research have been misdirected. Scientists and government alike have failed colleagues and the public.

FEW experiences are more wounding than to see a generous and selfless gift selfishly misused by its recipient. So the revelations last week that a major French cancer charity has been bestowing large sums in highly questionable ways (see page 103) will hurt many people: the donors of the funds, innocent recipients of research funds who may be contaminated by association, applicants for funds who were wrongly rejected, and, not least cancer sufferers.

The allegations of serious mismanagement at France's biggest medical charity, L'Association pour la Recherche sur le Cancer (ARC), made by the national audit commission, are serious. But what is even more shocking is that it has taken more than a decade for the situation to be officially recognized. Rumours about the running of the ARC have circulated for at least 15 years, But until last week the organization's donors, who annually contribute around FFr600 million, have had no clear idea of how their money was spent.

The answer, it now appears, is "badly". According to the audit, only a quarter of the charity's spending has gone directly on research. To make things worse, many of the grants distributed by the ARC were not assessed through proper peer review.

The facts did not come to light sooner because the ARC has fiercely resisted outside inspection. The organization has, on occasion, taken advantage of researchers and physicians who benefited from its largesse, in order to challenge accusations of mismanagement. When allegations similar to those of the audit commission were made in 1994, the ARC solicited letters of support from researchers — more than a thousand of whom obliged. The letters were fed into the ARC's public relations machine, which had been put into high gear in a desperate bid to alleviate public concern.

Proper management of such charities is doubly important because of their growing importance in research. The national biomedical research organization INSERM receives about FFr75 million annually from charities. While this amount is small compared with INSERM's total budget of FFr2.7 billion, it is significant compared with the FFr300 million provided by INSERM to its laboratories for equipment and supplies. Some INSERM laboratories depend on the ARC for up to half of such spending.

Arguably, some of the ARC's current woes stem from its origins. It was created by one man, Jacques Crozemarie, an engineer at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), following the death of his wife from a brain tumour. The charismatic Crozemarie has a flair for sophisticated fund-raising techniques which resulted in the collection of large sums, which in turn gained Crozemarie the support of many prominent cancer researchers. The agency has since evolved as a mammoth self-appointed fund-raising agency, to which donors gave in the belief that their money would find its way to cancer research in one way or another.

This mutual dependency between Crozemarie and leading cancer researchers appears to have resulted in an autocratic organization of the charity that has given a few individuals control of the distribution of enormous sums of money. The executive board includes many members who receive funds from the charity. Combine secrecy and conflict of interest in that way, and you maximize the potential for abuse. The charity must be reconstituted.

The scandal highlights a glaring lack of regulation of charities in France — there is no organization capable of insisting on adequate standards of openness and scientific integrity. Policy-makers in other countries need to take note of this debacle and reflect on whether their regulatory environment is equally lax. If so, prompt audits of research charities may be advisable.

Researchers involved in the running of charities and non-profit organizations everywhere should also be scrutinizing their consciences. Even if their formal accountabilities are private, there is a clear public duty that they should achieve, and be seen to achieve, exemplary levels of transparency and quality. The example provided by scientists on the board of the ARC appears to be much less than inspiring. □

Money is not enough

The increases in Japan's budgets for science are welcome. But better management and supervision are also required.

THE Japanese government at last seems to be making efforts to pump much needed extra money into its public-sector research system. The increases in science-related budgets (see page 105) are remarkable in Japan's troubled economic circumstances. Much of the credit can be given to a small band of comparatively young politicians who are lobbying for science and have passed a new law to help them to that end (see *Nature* **378**, 227;1995). But they should also ensure that the money is well spent.

The complex and bureaucratic dispersion of public research funds is extremely wasteful of Japanese taxpayers' money. For example, universities often have plenty of funds to buy equipment but have no money to employ technicians to look after it. Gleaming new machines have to be maintained by inexpert graduate students (who deserve more creative tasks), while older — but still functional — equipment is left to rot. More money has to be spent on technicians and on offering them salaries that are competitive with industry.

Also lacking is a system of supervision to ensure that government projects represent sensible investments. The past few decades are strewn with examples of wasteful government projects that led virtually nowhere — the nuclear-powered ship *Mutsu*, for example, gobbled up more than a billion dollars and spent all but a few days of its 15-year life sitting in port. Now it is being converted into a diesel-powered oceanographic vessel at considerable cost to Japan's taxpayers. The notorious fifth-generation computer and the Monju fast-breeder reactor are other underwhelming examples of the country's use of public funds.

Fortunately, the same band of young politicians that is lobbying for more money is also trying to set up a science and technology assessment organization to oversee government projects (see *Nature* **378**, 657; 1995). It is to be hoped that it succeeds and that the organization is truly impartial and well-informed in its judgements. □