

# Israel weighs up new funding agency

Top scientists say that basic biomedical research is flagging.

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Israel is a research powerhouse, sustained by a per-capita level of spending that, by some counts, is the highest in the world. But most of that money is spent by industry; in basic research, which is mostly conducted in higher-education institutions, Israel lags behind many other developed countries (see graph), with biomedical research bringing up the rear.

Israeli researchers are on a quest to remedy that by establishing the country's own biomedical research funding agency, along the lines of the US National Institutes of Health or Britain's Medical Research Council, and boosting funding by as much as tenfold.

At an international workshop last week in Jerusalem, leading researchers declared their support for establishing a National Fund for Biomedical Research (NFBR). The biggest hurdle remains the Israeli ministry of finance, where officials are reserving judgement on the proposal.

Compared with Israel's roughly US\$65 million in merit-based basic research funding each year, the United States, with 50 times the population, has 1,000 times as much federal funding for basic research. The US National Institutes of Health alone is a \$30-billion agency.

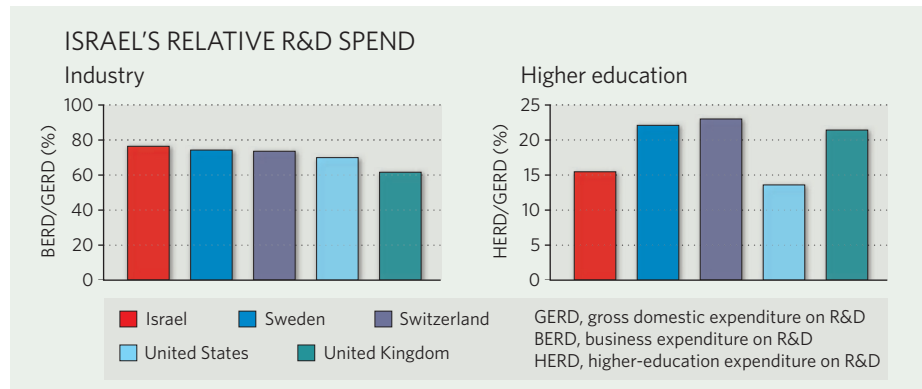
The Israel Science Foundation (ISF), which oversees government funding for basic research, has allocated just \$8 million annually for biomedicine in recent years. Another \$2 million in state support goes to clinical research through the ministry of health.

Immunologist Ruth Arnon of the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, who is also vice-president of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, leads a task force that last year published a report calling for the establishment of the NFBR. It concluded that Israel significantly underutilizes its potential resources in the biomedical research field owing to limited research funds, outdated infrastructure and the difficulty that young researchers have in finding jobs in Israel.

"Significantly expanding biomedical research in Israel can bring Israeli scientists back from overseas, create a healthier society — and ensure that Israel is known throughout the world for its science rather than for



Ruth Arnon calls for a boost to biomedical research.



violence and conflict," she says.

A new national fund for biomedical research should aim to give out \$100 million annually, she says. She predicts that the NFBR could be up and running by 2011.

At the workshop last week, Daniel Hershkowitz, the minister for science and technology, said that next year he would bring the proposal before the ministerial committee on science and technology, which has the power to make policy decisions on behalf of the government. Deputy health minister Yakov Litzman also pledged support for an increase in funding, and Meir Sheetrit, chairman of the science and technology committee of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, said that he will bring the proposal up for discussion there.

But a finance-ministry official attending the workshop, who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to comment, was less sanguine. He said that he still needed to be convinced that new money for biomedical research should take precedence over research funding in other fields. He also noted that, statutorily, his ministry

cannot allocate money for a specific research purpose; research funds are allocated to the Council of Higher Education, an independent body that accredits and funds Israeli universities. The council then decides how much of its budget to hand over to the ISF.

Others have more creative ideas about where the money might come from. Sheetrit suggests it could be diverted from the \$350-million budget of the chief scientist in the ministry

of industry, trade and labour, which is the government's main office for funding applied research.

To ease the financial strain, Arnon suggests that the NFBR could be established modestly, with an initial budget of \$20 million, and gradually ramp up funding. It could, she says, start out as a division of the ISF before becoming a fully fledged independent funding body.

Arnon thinks the NFBR could remedy the flaws she sees in the current system. For one, ISF grants are small, limited to a maximum of \$50,000 a year for five years, whereas a modern biomedical research laboratory usually costs at least three times that much to run. This means that researchers must apply for multiple grants.

"The average Israeli scientist spends a third of his time writing grants and grant reports," Arnon says. The NFBR would allow researchers to receive adequate funding from a single source, she says, enabling them to devote more time to their scientific work.

Arnon also singles out clinical research as in need of a fix. "We interviewed quite a few clinicians in preparing our report, and they said that the most critical factor preventing them from performing research is a lack of protected time," she says. "Clinicians come to work early in the morning and work late into the afternoon and their time is completely consumed by clinical tasks."

Undeterred by the coolness of the finance-ministry official last week, Arnon says that she and her colleagues are talking to policy-makers at the finance and other ministries. "The money is there — it's a matter of deciding priorities," she says. "I'll be knocking on doors and making my case. We have to do this."

**Haim Watzman**

SOURCE: I. M. ASHER

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