



CNIO director Mariano Barbacid (left) and science minister Cristina Garmendia are at loggerheads.

POLICY

'Soap opera' sours cancer chief hunt

Spain's scientists worried by fallout from high-profile spat.

BY ALISON ABBOTT

A bitter row between a prominent Spanish biologist and the country's science minister has spiralled into a potentially damaging leadership crisis at the country's top cancer research institute.

The Spanish National Cancer Research Centre (CNIO) in Madrid is trying to find a replacement for molecular oncologist Mariano Barbacid, who became the centre's founding director in 1998. But an international committee of five high-ranking scientists has now withdrawn from the process after its search for a director became caught up in the quarrel

between Barbacid and the minister for science and innovation, Cristina Garmendia, who has repeatedly clashed with Spanish scientists (see 'New path for researchers').

Members of the search committee were dismayed early this month when their shortlist of four candidates was leaked to the press, and then concerned when Garmendia's ministry scheduled a meeting of the CNIO's governing board to announce the new director for 16 May, giving them just ten days to make a decision. The top candidate withdrew last week, although this may not be connected with the row. The governing board is now seeking new candidates and deferring further

discussions until 22 June. For researchers at the institute, events are playing out like an unhappy soap opera and could harm their chances of attracting a top player.

Barbacid, a co-discover of the first cancer-causing gene, or oncogene, announced in September 2009 that he wished to step down as director to concentrate on his research, once a successor could be found. The trouble began when the ministry could not offer suitable employment conditions for international candidates. A new search started, and there were plans for one of the institute's vice-directors to become interim director — until the small bombshell of the Experimental Therapeutics Programme dropped in December 2010.

Barbacid had created the programme in 2006, aiming to develop drug candidates based on chemicals that selectively target oncogenes. Using government loans to support the research, he patented several small molecules in October 2010. But at around the same time the ministry declined to extend the loans.

Barbacid says he quickly found two private investors to cover the shortfall, but the ministry rejected this plan in December, saying that its legal counsel had advised that the arrangement was incompatible with the laws governing research foundations. Barbacid was furious. "I checked with good lawyers who made sure the scheme was in compliance with the law," he says. "Garmendia's lawyers are just wrong — and her intentions were malicious." The ministry declined to comment to *Nature* on the row.

On 4 March, the Spanish parliament approved a new law that allows public research foundations to attract private funding for research and innovation. But the ministry did not change its position on the private funding for the oncogene drug programme. When Barbacid issued a press release on 3 May describing a recently published drug target, he took the opportunity to criticize the ministry for preventing him from developing the findings into a potential therapy. The ministry quickly hit back at Barbacid for "raising false hopes in cancer sufferers", and for seriously breaching professional ethics. It then announced that his successor would be unveiled on 16 May. "It was a visceral response to get rid of me," says Barbacid. A ministry spokesman denied there was a connection between the two announcements.

Miguel Ángel Piris, a former CNIO vice-president who left in February to take up a position at the University Hospital Marques de Valdecilla in Santander, Spain, says he "hopes that the clash will not harm the prestige of the CNIO or its director, who has managed to create a respected and prestigious institution". Miguel Beato, director of the Centre for Genomic Regulation in Barcelona, adds that the affair underlines a weakness in Spain's science system. "Spain doesn't have research councils or authoritative research agencies who can mediate such rows," he says. "Politicians have too much direct influence on science here." ■

SPAIN'S SCIENCE LAW

New path for researchers

After a two-year gestation, a controversial update to Spain's science law was finally approved by Congress on 12 May. The bill aims to create a research framework akin to those of other European countries, including a structured career path and an independent research-granting agency. The legislation has been a key goal of science minister Cristina Garmendia since she took office in 2008, and researchers have campaigned vigorously to ensure that the final bill protects jobs and funding.

But the final law does not go far enough

for the Dignified Research campaign, supported by 2,500 scientists. They had asked the government to implement five-year, tenure-track contracts with regular evaluations that, if passed, would lead to a guaranteed job. Instead, the bill creates 'access contracts' for postdoctoral researchers that do not necessarily lead to a permanent position. The Confederation of Spanish Scientific Societies is also concerned that the law fails to establish clearly the independence of the granting agency. **Michele Catanzaro**