Ambitious researchers take awkward first steps to a Euro-NIH

Europe urgently needs a new research council with the power, independence and financial clout of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) if it is to reverse the brain drain to the US and elsewhere: that was the opinion bandied about at a lively meeting in Paris last month. But as plans are drawn up to bring the council into existence as early as 2004, some question whether Europe is ready for an NIH.

The proposed European Research Council (ERC) would fund long-term basic research—something many feel is neglected by the European Union (EU)'s Framework Programme, which is primarily designed to support well-defined, short-term projects.

The ERC should complement both the Framework Programme and existing national research councils, said Nobel laureate John Sulston. "It would bring excellent people together from all over Europe and put them in the same place," he said, "and it would demand no long-range plans."

Sulston pointed to the Human Genome Project—too bold and open-ended for the Framework Programme and too big for any one nation's funding agency—as a natural fit for the ERC.

The ERC could foster healthy competition by funding only the best national agency–backed projects in a given area of research, said Jean-Patrick Connerade, president of the Euroscience forum. There is currently no competition between national agencies; the Framework Programme only funds projects that are not supported by the national agencies.

The ERC could also support archiving schemes such as the European Bioinformatics Institute, which in collaboration with the Sanger Institute maintains a public database of human gene sequences, Sulston added. Europe does not currently have a coherent way to fund the institute, he noted. "It is extraordinary to me that Europe, with its sense of history, has such a low regard for archiving."

All ambitious goals aside, the discussion centered, not surprisingly, around money.

Although the EU has vowed to increase research funding from 1.9% of the gross domestic product to 3% by 2010, many scientists remain skeptical. Barry Holland, a vocal critic of the ERC, added that the plan is also fundamentally flawed.

"To fulfil a really effective role, the ERC would have be a genuinely federal agency in the style of the NIH," said Holland, a researcher at the University of Paris-Sud. "This can never be achieved when the only conceivable source of funding is a collection of non-federal independent states." The annual budget for the sixth Framework Programme is around €4 billion; the NIH's budget for 2003 is roughly €25 billion.

European scientists first dreamed up the idea of an ERC a decade ago. There was much animated discussion, but nothing was accomplished. Faced with Europe's continuing lag in science, its poor record in translational research and the mass exodus of young scientists, the EU Council brought back the project last year.

An expert group of national research council chiefs and other science administrators will now begin to define how the council can be structured and funded. But progress on the project will not be easy, predicted Holland, "because no national politician can see the value of such a federal agency."

Others believe the time is now, provided the ERC has teeth. "The ministers of research in Europe should ponder the following important question: if nothing emerges, or if only an ineffective body is created, what will young scientists conclude?" said Connerade. "It is important to show them that Europe really means business in research."

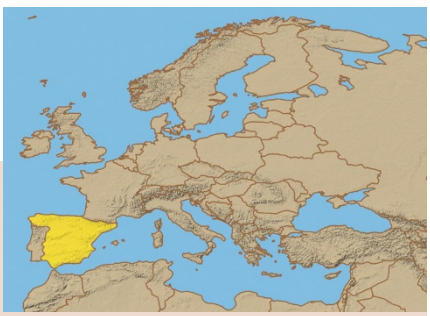
Laura Spinney, Paris

Spain strives for its own 'excellence'

Even as researchers pursue the dream of a unified European research network, at least one nation—Spain—is forging ahead on its own. In a bid to build 'networks of excellence', the Spanish health ministry last month announced its plan to link basic and clinical research projects. The ultimate goal, said minister Ana Pastor, is to bring "basic advances nearer [to] the clinic as soon as possible."

The European Commission began networks of excellence, which must involve at least three centers from three countries, to overcome the fragmentation of European research. Inspired by the move, Spain last year became the first—and to date, the only—European country to mimic a similar plan. Spain's scheme, worth $57 million, brings together researchers from across the country's 17 autonomous regions.

The Madrid-based 'Instituto de Salud Carlos III' (ISC), the ministry's research agency, plans to fund 69 projects, linking 11,331 researchers in 290 centers. Each network comprises at least five centers and four regional communities, and will function as a 'node' so that the ISC can map the country's progress in biomedical research.



The ISC realized that networking was necessary when a 2001 survey revealed that more than 40% of biomedical research was done in single research units, says Antonio Campos, head of the agency. Creating national networks will also allow Spanish scientists to participate in Europe-wide projects through their networking with other European groups, he says.

Panels of national and foreign experts approved the projects, which must include at least one center or team with 'emerging potential'. This is the only way to prevent research funds from being devoured by prominent groups in big centers, says Campos.

Rare diseases are highly represented among the projects and are surpassed only by oncology, neurology and cardiovascular research. For instance, the network on mitochondrial diseases, funded at $280,000 a year for three years, gathers 81 researchers to perform clinical and epidemiological studies and to establish banks of tissue, fibroblasts, and DNA and RNA samples.

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