better research environment for life sciences in Shanghai, to attract first-class Chinese researchers working overseas, and finally to create a research institute that ranks among the world's leading centers for biological and biomedical research," says the institute's new director Chien-Ping Wu.

As part of the inauguration ceremony, SIBS signed an accord with the Shanghai Second Medical University, one of China's leading medical schools, to set up a joint Health Science Center to reinforce the link between basic biological research and clinical applications. SIBS now employs more than 1000 researchers, but the total number of tenured staff is set to decrease to 600 plus an additional 50 management staff over the next few years.

SIBS also plans to recruit around 40 Chinese scientists from overseas as group leaders, but convincing them to return

from abroad has been difficult. "While conditions for research are improving rapidly, we cannot offer salaries competitive with those in the West," admits Jianrui Wu, a SIBS biochemist. "A few years ago, it used to be difficult and time-consuming to obtain even the most basic materials necessary for biological research," he says, adding, "This has changed now that several US and European supply companies have opened offices in Shanghai. You can get almost everything now, it just takes a little longer."

Bing Sin, who returned to China in May to direct an immunology group at SIBS after five years at the US National Institutes of Health, says "When I left China, it was almost impossible to do competitive work. While resources are still limited, I feel I can compete with scientists in the West."

ROBERT TRIENDL, TOKYO

...and solicits US collaboration

Yu Peng, China's vice minister of health, has met with National Institutes of Health (NIH) director, Harold Varmus, in an effort to improve biomedical research collaboration between the two countries.

Peng told *Nature Medicine* that the purpose of her visit—which included stops at Harvard, Yale, and NIH's Fogarty Center, which oversees around 230 Chinese scientists on the NIH campus—was the formation of joint initiatives in HIV vaccine development, the Human Genome Project, cardiovascular research and clinical research into Chinese herbal medicines.

Chinese epidemiologist Yiming Shao, deputy director of the National Center for AIDS Prevention and Control, Beijing, accompanied Peng to discuss ways in which China can become involved in NIH AIDS vaccine trials.

MYRNA WATANABE, CONNECTICUT

Institute surprise for Italian scientists

In a move that has surprised many Italian biomedical scientists, the government has approved a decree that would transform its Higher Institute of Public Health, Istituto Superiore della Sanità (ISS) into the country's leading biomedical research organization.

If ratified by parliament, the decree would place the new group in direct competition with the recently reformed National Research Council (CNR), which has hitherto been the country's only public biomedical research body. It would also place greater emphasis on applied rather than basic research.

The proposal has received a cautious welcome from Italy's biomedical community. "Strengthening the activities and influence of the ISS in biomedicine may foster serious conflicts among different groups with interests in this field," says Gianluigi Gessa, professor of pharmacology at Cagliari University Medical School and a member of the recently revamped CNR scientific committee (*Nature Med.* 5, 132; 1999).

Under the plan, links between the ISS and the 31 national biomedical research institutes, Istituti di Ricovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico (IRCCS), would be strengthened. Giuseppe Benagiano, Director General of the ISS, plans to organize the IRCCS into a biomedical research network, the funds for which would continue to come from the Ministry of Health, but which would be

controlled by the ISS. The new institute will be renamed the "National Institute of Health" after its namesake in the US, in a bid to reinforce its position.

Until now, the ISS has been funded by the Ministry of Health, and has worked largely within the field of public health. Only one-quarter of its annual IL 250 billion (US\$140 million) budget has been spent on biomedical research projects, which have been confined to specific areas such as AIDS and tuberculosis.

But under the new decree, the ISS is expected to double its scientific research budget by the end of the year and to expand its research interests into the fields of aging and cardiovascular disease, according to Benagiano.

The transformation is the unexpected outcome of a two-year debate on whether to increase the technical and bureaucratic responsibilities of ISS or to redefine its duties up to a point that would allow it to coordinate Italy's biomedical research programs.

It was widely believed that the government would plump for the former and leave the domain of biomedical research firmly in the hands of the Ministry of Research, which funds universities and the CNR. However, Benagiano and some of his more politically influential scientific colleagues, convinced the Cabinet

otherwise. "The determining factor," says Benagiano, "has been the ability to persuade our opponents that we will be more competitive on an international scale if we join forces. The CNR would maintain its focus on basic research, whereas the ISS would carry out and co-ordinate research directly relevant to the activities of the national health system."

The potential power of the new organization leaves Silvio Garattini, director of the Mario Negri Institute in Milan, in little doubt that the move will curtail the activities of the CNR because "the ISS, as the main center of coordinated biomedical research, is likely to receive and distribute a larger share of the government funds dedicated to biomedicine."

In fact, ISS would devote the same amount of funding as the CNR to biomedical research (IL100 million), but much of CNR's grant-giving authority has been resorbed into the Ministry of Research.

Piergiorgio Strata, a neurophysiologist at the University of Turin, voices the fears of many university scientists who would find themselves outside the new organization in grant terms, and still reliant on the Ministry of Research. They worry that clinical research will become the dominant force and that rather than integrating this field with basic research, the decree would separate them further.

MARTINA BALLMAIER, MILAN

Giuseppe Benagiano