

Italy continues R&D reforms

Continuing its efforts to reform its national R&D system (*Nature Med.*, 4; 751, 1998 & *Nature*, 392; 531, 1998), Italy is expected to issue a decree later this month outlining how university professors should be appointed. The initial legislation, drawn up by the Senate in July, has been revised to include detailed criteria that universities and candidates must meet to ensure merit-based selection. Furthermore, pending appointments must be posted on the internet for general inspection as a means of guaranteeing greater 'transparency' in the recruitment process.

The government revised the July legislation in response to fierce criticism from prominent scientists who found it to be inadequate for eliminating the risk that new appointments may be used to exchange favors. "Italian universities will [continue to] lie in the hands of the academic mafia unless proper rules for assessing candidates are introduced," said Nobel prize winner Rita Levi-Montalcini.

The reform is designed to give universities full autonomy in recruiting academics. This is in contrast to the previous system, which was dominated by the Minister for Research, who appointed national committees in various research disciplines to evaluate thousands of requests for professorships every five years. This system, centralized to Rome, often ground to a halt when the committees failed to consider applications in a timely manner, and a bureaucratic nightmare often ensued when applicants sued the committees for failing to review applications thoroughly. Under the new system, universities will establish their own committees that will be able to appoint academics as frequently as required. However, pessimists say that the reform will simply shift power from Roman to local mafias.

The government hopes that the decree will be seen as a clear sign that it is serious about restructuring the university system in line with international standards. However, some scientists are dubious about the latest efforts to improve the academic research system. Jacopo Meldolesi, scientific director of DIBIT, the research institute of the San Raffaele hospital in Milan, says the measures are still not enough to ensure that Italian universities can compete on an international scale.

MARTINA BALLMAIER, MILAN

US report blasts UNAIDS

In a damning report of the United Nations program to combat the spread of AIDS (UNAIDS), the US General Accounting Office (GAO) describes the organization as having made "limited progress" in its efforts to build worldwide support for HIV/AIDS projects. However, the report, which was requested by the US House Committee on International Relations (IR), heaps praise on the US Agency for International Development (USAID), for making "important contributions" in the same field.

The US is the primary sponsor of UNAIDS. It donated \$34 million—28 percent of total funds—to the biennial UNAIDS Secretariat budget for 1996-97. And in a statement released last month, Benjamin Gilman, Chairman of the IR committee, said "If our government, through USAID and the Center for Disease Control can do a better job than the UN to combat [HIV/AIDS], then we should shift funding to the more successful programs."

UNAIDS was set up in 1996 to provide a more targeted approach to the disease than had been possible through previous UN efforts that existed under the auspices of the World Health Organization. The GAO criticizes UNAIDS for failing to meet goals such as increasing spending by UN agencies and building a field network of "theme groups" in specific countries to address the problem. It also says that data are not available to measure UNAIDS progress in increasing spending on HIV/AIDS by donor countries, the private sector, or affected countries.

Responding to the report, UNAIDS points out that the evaluation was initiated only 18 months into the group's first biennium—when UNAIDS was still in a "transition" period—and highlights areas where

facts are presented from a "glass-half empty" rather than "glass half full" perspective. The committee will hold a hearing on September 16th, which will be attended by UNAIDS director Peter Piot, to discuss the findings.

KAREN BIRMINGHAM, NEW YORK

Japan to ban human cloning

Japan has taken its first step towards introducing a ban on human cloning. Last month the Science Council, an advisory panel of the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho), announced that it will impose strict controls on cloning research carried out at universities and national research institutes.

According to the council's latest report, research involving the cloning of humans is "ethically unacceptable." Regulations will be introduced to alleviate concern among the general public over cloning techniques, which has grown in the wake of the recent births, and subsequent death of one, of the cloned calves at Kinki University and Ishikawa Prefectural Livestock Research Centre in Japan. The regulations will restrict the application of techniques such as somatic cell nuclear transfer to nonhuman cells and all cloning projects will undergo careful assessment by a committee of experts in ethics, medicine and the law. The new guidelines were expected to take effect at the end of the August, following final approval from Monbusho.

Meanwhile, the Council for Science and Technology (CST), the country's principal science-policy body chaired by the prime minister, is proposing a legal ban on human cloning research at all scientific institutions. CST will canvas public opinion on the issue before announcing a final decision this fall.

ASAKO SAEGUSA, TOKYO



Claudio Bordignon

New director for Italy's largest research institute

As of September 1st, Claudio Bordignon becomes the new scientific director of the Istituto Scientifico San Raffaele in Milan—the largest research institute in

Italy. In a move aimed at consolidating basic and clinical research, Bordignon will replace both Guido Pozza as the head of clinical research at the San Raffaele hospital and Jacopo Meldolesi as director of DIBIT, a basic research institute attached to the hospital.

"It is my goal to make San Raffaele the

leading biomedical research institute in Europe through the translation of basic research in genetics, tumor and transplantation immunology, gene therapy, cell and tissue engineering into medical practice," says Bordignon.

He has a yearly research budget of L60 billion (US\$35 million) in government funds at his disposal, in addition to 235 staff, 272 research fellows and a 1000 bed hospital.

Meldolesi will become the chairman of the neuroscience department, and Pozza has been appointed to the board of the medical school.

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