Research legacy of suicide surgeon

Sadly, it has taken the suicide of prominent Argentinean surgeon Rene Favaloro to provoke the country's government into preventing bankruptcy at his cardiovascular research foundation, which also provides health care to 700 indigents every year.

The republic's president, Fernando de la Rua, has now acknowledged a letter sent to him by Favaloro just two days before his death, in which the 77-year-old pioneer of coronary bypass surgery admitted to being "desperate" and pleaded with the president to ask entrepreneurs to support the foundation.

Favaloro shot himself in the chest in late July, and it is widely believed that the financial crisis of his institute, the Fundacion Favaloro (FF), which combines basic and clinical cardiovascular research with a healthcare center, was the major factor in his suicide.

In a separate letter sent to *La Nación* newspaper, Favaloro wrote that he found himself "facing the hardest moments of his life....We are owed US$18 million and it's increasingly difficult to maintain our daily work, research and teaching activities," he admitted, adding "...in recent times, I have become a beggar [since] my task is to ask for more money to go on with our work".

Favaloro opened the FF on his return to Argentina in 1972 after spending 10 years working in the US. The institute's research priorities include angiogenesis to improve myocardial revascularization, atherosclerosis and thrombosis, plus studies of rejection of heart transplants—a surgery Favaloro introduced into the country. However, the nonprofit FF, which employs over 1,100 people, has been owed millions of dollars from public organizations such as the Institute of Social Services for Retired People and Pensioners for more than a decade. As a result, the FF accrued multimillion-dollar bank debts.

The attention that the suicide has focused on the FF has made the common plight of several of the country's healthcare and biomedical research institutions public, and many are calling for the government to pay off the FF institute's debts and provide it with financial aid. Roberto Favaloro, current director of the FF, told *Nature Medicine* that the government has now indicated its intention to transform the FF's status into that of a public supplier of cardiovascular care so that it can continue operating. However, this proposal is still under discussion.

Rene Favaloro

Argentina spends only 0.33% of its GNP on R&D, substantially less than neighboring Brazil (1%) or Chile (0.6%). Research funds come mainly from the National Agency of Scientific and Technological Promotion, launched four years ago by the government. Money provided by this agency is paid out of credits from the Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo bank, and Favaloro's letter pleaded with de la Rúa to ask the bank for more money.

The problem is that these credits will only last for the next three years, "Thus, the future of science is conditional on these credits," explains Armando Parodi of the Instituto de Investigaciones Biotecnológicas, Universidad de San Martin, Buenos Aires.

This year, the government reduced the budget of the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research (CONICET) by a further 10% on last year's decrease of the same amount. And CONICET researchers' salaries, which have been frozen since 1992, were reduced in July. "The financing situation of biomedical research is extremely precarious," admits Parodi.

According to Rodolfo Rothlin, professor of pharmacology at the Buenos Aires University, financing is not the only problem facing research. "We need a higher interaction between the government and the scientific community," he says, explaining that politicians and society do not appreciate scientific knowledge as a key tool for development. "We need intelligent advocates to direct the country towards a society and economy based on knowledge...something that can only be achieved by profound structural reforms." Accelerating these changes through suicide would be the most dramatic of legacies for a research clinician.

Xavier Bosch, Barcelona

Oxford scientists defect to Imperial

After he was forced to resign his position of director of the Wellcome Trust Centre for the Epidemiology of Infectious Diseases at Oxford University and his job as a Wellcome Trust governor, following allegations of sexual harrassment (*Nature* **404**, 696 & 802; 2000), the future of leading biomathematical epidemiologist Roy Anderson had been the subject of intense speculation. But despite rumors that he would move to an academic lab on the west coast of the US, Anderson has accepted an offer only 50 miles away: Anderson's team will take up residence at Imperial College School of Medicine, London, by the end of the year.

The move, along with the defection of Anderson's senior colleagues Brian Spratt and Geoff Smith, is a substantial blow to Oxford, which will be 80 scientsts down and several million pounds poorer in grants. Despite recent events, Anderson still enjoys the status of one of the world's leading biomathematical epidemiologists, and the exit of Smith, an expert pox virologist, will almost wipe out Oxford's virology research program.

The researchers have been wooed by Jonathan Weber, who explains that the new teams will be the prefect fit for a new institute that he is creating at Imperial. This will comprise infection and immunity researchers such as Peter Openshaw (respiratory syncitial virus), Charles Bangham (retroviral immunology) Paul Farrel (EBV tumor virology) and Mike Levine (meningococcal virology) from the Wright-Flemming Institute, in addition to epidemiology and biostatistics scientists in the Geoffrey Rose group headed by Paul Elliot.

The changes will be watched with interest by those in the biomedical community, which will be expecting great things from such a star-studded center, will also be curious to see Oxford's recovery strategy, and will continue to observe Anderson's behavior..

Karen Birmingham, London