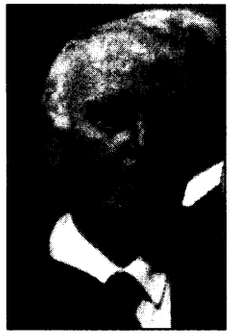
ITALY

University Appointments Scandal Widens

VENICE—Physicist Giorgio Salvini, Italy's minister for research and universities, is probably wishing he had stuck to science. Since his appointment in January, one of Salvini's most pressing tasks has been to reform the discredited system of national competitions, or "concorsi," which determine who will be appointed to university chairs. Meanwhile, a scandal that began to engulf the system last year continues to widen, and Salvini's prescriptions for reform remain bogged down in parliamentary politics. As a result, professorial appointments are stalled, and some 2000 posts are now vacant in university departments around the country.



PAOLO COCCO/REUTERS/ARCHIVE PHOTOS

Giorgio Salvini: Pushing for reform.

The crisis confronting Italian universities is a product of a national fever for rooting out corruption in public institutions and widespread dissatisfaction in the academic community with the concorsi system. The system came under public scrutiny a year ago when a number of concorsi were exposed as being rigged (*Science*, 11 November 1994, p. 965). Now more than 100 professors, mainly members of concorsi boards that judge the candidates, plus a handful of academics who were awarded chairs, are under investigation for corruption. And the investigations moved into a higher gear last week when a rush of press reports declared that Rome's public prosecutor, Adelchi D'Ippolito, who leads the concorsi inquiries nationally, has collected enough evidence to threaten with trial nearly half of those under suspicion for abuse of office.

These investigations were preceded by swelling complaints from within the universities themselves. The current system "threatens to bury alive once and for all the ambitions of our young researchers and of the honest citizen," says Laura Calzà, an associate professor in the medical faculty at Cagliari University. What was initially a trickle of grievances turned into a flood earlier this year when a professor from a medical faculty who chaired a concorso board was given a 12-month suspended sentence for imposing his own protégés when assigning posts. The scientific community saw that exposing corruption could bring results.

Since then, 10% of the appointments for full professor made in 1992 by 330 concorsi have been blocked and some appointments revoked because of legal challenges, resignations, suspension of board members, and inquiries by the National University Council (CUN). Investigations into a further 10 concorsi were announced last week.

When he was first appointed, Salvini had hoped to clean up the system in time for a new round of concorsi beginning in June. He first put forward a proposal for a new system in March. It was then revised by a special commission of the Senate, and the final bill was presented to the Senate 6 weeks ago but has not gone forward because of fierce argument over the new rules. Powerful university professors are known to have links with parliamentarians and are believed to be blocking the changes, fearing they would reduce their power. "There are some people secretly opposing me," Salvini says.

Salvini's new system would maintain the two grades, associate and full professor, but in place of the old concorsi boards, which assigned posts anywhere in the country, Salvini's scheme would hold competitions in two phases: one national, which would choose a group of candidates 50% larger than the number of posts available; and a second, at university faculty level, which would assign individual chairs. Full professors would be judged by up to 40 professors in the field, who would decide by majority vote.

The Senate's failure to act on the reform proposal has put Salvini in an unenviable position. The old concorsi system is thoroughly discredited and reforms stalled, but the universities have meanwhile started another academic year with gaping holes in their research and teaching staff. Some professors are accusing Salvini of neglecting his duty by not starting another round of concorsi. As a result, Salvini said at a press conference last week that the situation is getting desperate. "The concorsi can't wait," he said, so "I have decided that we'll go ahead, even if with the old rules."

And that has prompted an uproar from some academics who have been demanding reforms. Salvini has been inundated with letters of protest from the CUN and academics of all grades against proceeding using the old rules. Claudio Modini, CUN member and associate in the medical faculty at Rome's "La Sapienza" University, says, "It is absurd that, despite public opinion, the government, the [science] minister, the university community, all demanding a new law for the concorsi, these are still being operated under the old system." As of now, however, there's no telling when a new system will be in place.

–Susan Biggin

Susan Biggin is a writer in Venice, Italy.

HUMAN GENETICS MEETING

Publicity Fears Cancel Gene Talk

MINNEAPOLIS—On a Friday morning late last month, hundreds of geneticists descended on a convention hall here for the "breakthrough" research session of the 45th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG). The main attraction: The unveiling of one of the year's hottest gene discoveries—the defective gene that causes Bloom's syndrome. Patients with the syndrome become riddled with cancers, so the gene's identity may give insight into the mechanisms that trigger malignancy. But the geneticists who attended the session left disappointed—victims, said some conference attendees, of a larger problem that's been plaguing conferences, especially the big open ones like the ASHG meeting. Worried both about tipping off competitors and about generating premature publicity in the press, researchers are becoming reluctant to present their hot new findings until they have been published—at which point, they are already stale.

The Bloom's syndrome talk apparently fell victim to fears of advance publicity. It was to be given by geneticist Nathan Ellis, a member of the team led by James German of the New York Blood Center in New York City that made the discovery. But the results are scheduled to be published in an upcoming issue of *Cell*, and, according to ASHG press officer Jane Salomon, on learning that German had spoken with journalists, *Cell* editor Benjamin Lewin contacted German, warning that publicity for the new finding would jeopardize its publication.

Lewin refused to talk with *Science*. But German says that, although Lewin drew his attention to *Cell*'s policy on prepublication publicity, "there was certainly no unpleasantness, no threats." Nonetheless, German pulled the paper from the meeting, and the disappointed geneticists were less understanding than he was about the situation. "It was terrible. The scientific process was disturbed. Dr. German was prevented from presenting [his findings] for criticism in an open forum of his colleagues," says geneticist Richard Gatti of the University of California, Los Angeles.

Although all journals loathe being scooped by the lay press, most (including *Science*) allow researchers to present their findings at conferences even when journalists are present, and even if it results in press coverage. *Cell*, however, has a reputation for

being less flexible. "That's sometimes the way it is with *Cell*," says ASHG director Huntington Willard of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

But even when *Cell* is not directly involved, a general fear that publicity might hurt their chances of being published in the top journals is making researchers in highly competitive fields like genetics leery of presenting new findings at conferences, especially those whose organizers actively seek press coverage in an attempt to win public support—and ultimately, federal funding—for research. Not only do the researchers fear that the results will no longer appear novel to journal editors, but they also worry that if they report unpublished work, they could be scooped by their competitors. As a result, says ASHG program director Reed Pyeritz of the Medical College of Pennsylvania and Hahnemann University in Pittsburgh, "people don't go to meetings expecting to hear very cutting-edge stuff."

The tension seems likely to continue. Some geneticists—including Ellis—suggest that the ASHG should reconsider its policy of allowing journalists to attend their meetings. But Willard rebuffs that idea: "One of [ASHG's] missions is public education, and journalists are instrumental in that process," he says. "I don't think I would ever be in favor of banning journalists."

–Rachel Nowak

CANCER PREVENTION

Tamoxifen's Trials and Tribulations

Three years ago, the government launched a $68 million experiment to learn whether tamoxifen, a drug used to treat some breast cancer patients, could prevent breast cancer from occurring in healthy women. This major clinical trial—sponsored by the National Cancer Institute (NCI)—also sought to find out whether tamoxifen's hormonelike qualities could reduce osteoporosis and fatal heart disease. The plan called for thousands of women matching a high-risk cancer profile to take the drug.

From the start, the trial—the most ambitious cancer prevention study ever attempted—has been dogged by controversy, as critics questioned the wisdom of giving healthy women such a powerful drug. And last year, it suffered a setback when NCI put the recruitment of new subjects on hold for 6 months while monitoring procedures were overhauled (*Science*, 10 June 1994, p. 1524). Now, just as the trial was getting back on track, it is facing two new obstacles. The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), which is helping to pay for the study, decided last month to reduce its commitment because the data may be too thin to be of use for cardiovascular studies. And NCI has become embroiled in a wrangle over whether tamoxifen should be listed as a carcinogen in California—a label that could make it more difficult to recruit subjects for the NCI trial and might even cause some breast cancer patients to forgo the drug.

NHLBI's change of heart was communicated by the institute's director, Claude Lenfant, in a letter to NCI Director Richard Klausner dated 5 October. Lenfant based his decision—first reported in *The Cancer Letter*—on the fact that not enough minority women or women over age 55 (groups that have a higher than average risk for heart disease) have entered the trial. "The way the study is going," Lenfant said in a telephone interview with *Science*, "we will get some information, but not what we were expecting."

In his letter, Lenfant pointed out that the trial is not meeting its recruitment targets. While NCI had aimed to have 16,000 women signed up by June of 1994, Lenfant observed, "the total recruitment is only 11,500 women," fewer than 5000 of whom are age 55 or older and only 3% of whom are minorities. "For all these reasons, it has become apparent that the study does not have the power to provide significant data regarding cardiovascular clinical end points." The heart institute had originally promised $8 million for the trial; now it will provide only $3 million, of which $1.2 million has not yet been spent. Lenfant suggested using the remaining money to study indicators of cardiovascular disease, such as blood lipid levels, among the participants.

"The study does not have the power to provide significant data regarding cardiovascular clinical end points."

—Claude Lenfant

Klausner responded on 27 October, saying that NCI will run the recommended lipid studies, but it will also continue to watch for tamoxifen's cardiovascular benefits. Some of the expense of the cardiovascular monitoring will now have to be carried by NCI, however. "Frankly," says one NCI staffer, "I think [NHLBI] has been looking for a way out for a long time."

While NCI officials are disappointed by Lenfant's decision, they are more concerned about the long-term impacts of what is happening in California. Under a law known as Proposition 65, California must publish and maintain a list of all known carcinogens. In 1994, a group that advises the state—the Carcinogen Identification Committee (CIC)—identified tamoxifen as a risky drug because several clinical studies have shown that women using it had a slightly increased risk of endometrial cancer. CIC began collecting data, and after publishing a draft document and soliciting comment early this year, the committee decided unanimously in May that tamoxifen should be listed as a Prop 65 carcinogen.

At that point, says Thomas Mack, CIC's chair and an epidemiologist at the University of Southern California, Zeneca Pharmaceuticals of Wilmington, Delaware—the maker of tamoxifen—got alarmed and began calling physicians. NCI grantees and officials, including Leslie Ford, NCI's coordinator of the tamoxifen trial, called to protest the CIC's decision. In an unprecedented move, the state ordered that the CIC's advice be held in abeyance until after a public forum, held on 10 October.

In a telephone interview, Ford said she worries that if tamoxifen is put on the Proposition 65 list, patients who need it will be scared away. Yet, as Ford and many clinicians argue, the benefits of tamoxifen far outweigh the risks for cancer patients. John Glick, director of the cancer center at the University of Pennsylvania, says: "Many more patients would die as a result of their fear of taking" tamoxifen "than ever would die as a result of getting endometrial cancer."

Zeneca, meanwhile, flew its own staffers and a group of independent oncologists to appear before state officials in Sacramento on 10 October. Alan Milbauer, Zeneca's vice president for external affairs, noted that tamoxifen is not an environmental contaminant and is available only by prescription from physicians, who must warn patients of potential side effects. Because tamoxifen "has not been shown to cause cancer of the endometrium," Milbauer said, listing it as a carcinogen would do "significant harm" and give patients "incorrect, incomplete, and misleading information."

The blitz angered Mack. He refused to attend the forum because, he says, it was a "reprehensible" attempt to interfere with his panel's deliberations. So far, Mack says he isn't impressed by the new data. He says: "Unless something comes along that's a complete surprise, tamoxifen will be listed" as a carcinogen. And that may add yet another complication in recruiting patients to the prevention trial.

–Eliot Marshall