

AIDS RESEARCH

Program Funding, Italian Style

A freeze in government funding is doing "serious damage" to AIDS research in Italy, according to scientists. Since last summer, when disputes erupted over the focus and management of the National Program for AIDS Research, the program has been suspended while Health Minister Rosy Bindi overhauls it. Italian AIDS officials have assured *Science*, however, that by the end of the month the program will be up and running and disbursing almost as much research money as in recent years.

The 10-year-old program is credited with improving the overall caliber of Italian AIDS research, as well as giving researchers much-needed funding security. Operated through the National Health Institute [Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS)], under the Ministry of Health, it doled out \$17 million last year to about 250 research groups in hospitals, universities, and research institutes. Says Antonio Siccardi, director of HIV/AIDS basic research at the San Raffaele Scientific Institute in Milan: "It has been excellent in terms of high-quality publications, training of new researchers, and fruitful interaction between bench and bedside."

Despite the program's good track record, there have been rumblings within the Italian AIDS community that it needed updating. As the AIDS virus has become better understood, research programs in other countries including the United States have increasingly directed their funds toward therapeutics and patient care. But the Italian program has remained focused on basic research. Some researchers and many AIDS activists also have maintained privately that the program's assessment panels, which review research proposals, are biased, and that the scientists who sit on them preferentially fund their own projects.

These simmering discontents burst into the open last summer when an AIDS activist who sits on the National AIDS Committee seized the stage during an AIDS telethon conducted by French AIDS pioneer Luc Montagnier and the National Association for the Fight Against AIDS. In a 20-minute tirade, Vittorio Agnoletto accused the national program of funding bias and abandoning its responsibilities to people with AIDS. The attack sparked a wide national debate and prompted Bindi to freeze funding pending an investigation.

By now, many research groups are running into difficulty as they exhaust their grants. The funding freeze is "causing a good deal of damage, in both clinical and molecular research, and basic laboratory research," says Mauro Giacca, who heads the Molecular and Cell Biology Group at Trieste's International Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotech-

nology. "Only groups with some degree of independent funding can continue." Officials say that a revised program will be unveiled in a matter of weeks, ending the freeze.

Although the details of the updated program have not been officially released, Stefano Vella, director of the ISS AIDS department, has told *Science* that Bindi is "overhauling the project assessment system, introducing new criteria for [assessment] panel membership, and also making the program more clinically oriented." Vella adds that the revised program will go well beyond basic research, focusing on four areas: epidemiology, including patient support; opportunistic infections, including the increasingly common tuberculosis; pathogenesis, covering immunity, vaccines, and basic virology; and therapy, including clinical trials and cost-benefit studies. According to Vella, the four areas are to



Reformer. Health Minister Rosy Bindi.

receive \$1.5 million, \$2.5 million, \$6 million, and \$4 million, respectively. Not everyone is pleased with the shift in focus. Giacca, for one, still believes that "a lot more effort should be put into basic research: There is still too little known [about] the basic biology of this virus to really be able to improve patient treatment."

Also, new assessment panels have been set up for each of the research areas, and Bindi is considering requiring researchers to submit their proposals anonymously and excluding reviewers who have conflicts of interest from serving on the panels.

In the meantime, however, scientists say that good researchers are being left high and dry, and that worthy projects are being irreparably damaged. Vella, however, downplays the problem. He is hard at work, he says, on a new application form for grants, which should be mailed out to researchers by the end of the month.

—Susan Biggin

Susan Biggin is a science writer in Venice.

MILITARY ON CAMPUS

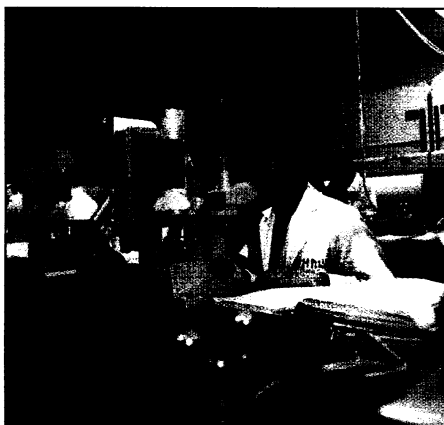
Budget Threats Force Policy Reversal

After being threatened with the potential loss of millions of dollars in research funding, two California universities have backed off from plans to phase out their Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) programs. San Jose State University and California State University (CSU), Sacramento, both of which objected to Department of Defense policies on gays in the military, turned around after DOD officials told them that they stood to lose a big chunk of federal money under a new budget measure passed last fall.

The set-to has been triggered by Representative Gerald Solomon (R-NY), who

has been gradually tightening the screws on schools that are raising obstacles to on-campus military recruitment and those with ROTC programs that are considering abolishing them. In 1994 and 1995, Solomon engineered amendments to federal laws that would deprive such schools of DOD funds after some campuses of the State University of New York banned military recruiters. Then, last fall in the "omnibus" budget appropriation for fiscal year 1997, these provisions were expanded to cover funding from other federal agencies, including the departments of Education, Energy, Transportation, and Health and Human Services. The provisions do not apply to the many institutions that got rid of their ROTC programs during the 1970s when public sentiment against the Vietnam War ran high. Solomon's rationale, according to an aide, is simple: "If people are going to expect the federal government to supply them with grants and contracts, they shouldn't be inhibiting another important federal program, which is defense and recruitment of personnel."

San Jose State decided to phase out its ROTC program in 1993, after President Clinton retreated from an unqualified endorsement of gays in the military and settled on a policy of telling people to keep their sexual preferences to themselves ("don't ask, don't tell"). But the school—which runs



At risk. Students examine cells in San Jose State's tissue-culture facility.