

interview a
dr. G. BUZZETTI

Caro Giuliano, vogliamo fare in Francia
quello che proponiamo per l'Italia

NEWS OF THE WEEK

FRANCE

Will French Science Swallow Zerhouni's Strong Medicine?

PARIS—Dull moments have become rare in French science and higher education. Since President Nicolas Sarkozy took office 18 months ago, heavily contested reforms have come at a frenetic pace. Still, most were child's play compared with what a high-wattage international committee prescribed in a surprisingly blunt report released on 13 November. The panel, led by former U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Elias Zerhouni, proposes a massive overhaul of French life sciences research that would create a single, strong funding agency and likely spell the death of several existing institutes.

The government has welcomed the report (tinyurl.com/inserm) as an endorsement of its own reformist program. Speaking at the 120th anniversary of the Pasteur Institute 2 weeks ago, research minister Valérie Pécresse promised Zerhouni—who grew up in Algeria and is fluent in French—that the proposals would “not remain a dead letter.” But trade unions are up in arms, and

Sauvons la Recherche, a left-wing researchers' movement that has fought the recent changes every step of the way, says it read the report with “astonishment” and “alarm.”

The panel—which included U.S. Nobelists Harold Varmus and Peter Agre, as well as top researchers and science administrators from Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Canada, and France—had been asked to review the performance of France's National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM). But it took the liberty of making a diagnosis—and prescribing a remedy—for the country's entire biological and medical research sector.

That sector is “strikingly” fragmented, the panel says: In addition to INSERM's €650 million effort, there are life science programs at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the Atomic Energy Commission, the National Cancer Institute, and at least four others. That leads to “unnecessary bureaucratic turf battles” and scientists spending “an inordinate amount of time” chasing funds, says the panel, which also criticizes INSERM's byzantine and unwieldy governance structure.

INSERM doesn't have its own institutes or campuses; most of its researchers are in so-called mixed units based at, and co-

administered by, universities or other host institutes. That creates even more paperwork and “diffuses responsibility and authority,” the report says. As to INSERM's scientific output, some of it excels, but the “large bulk ... is published in lower-tier journals.” (“Our

Prochiantz of the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, who co-authored a petition in favor of a single institute earlier this year. A group currently studying the problem at the ministry's request is expected to deliver a report soon that insiders believe will include a proposal for a new umbrella directorate to coordinate INSERM and the life sciences within CNRS.

But Zerhouni warns that would be “a cop-out” that could actually add a layer of unneeded complexity. “They really need to cut bureaucracy drastically,” he says. Still, says biologist Jules Hoffmann, president of the French Academy of Sciences, the directorate could be an intermediate structure that would “ideally, one day, melt everything together.”

Radically altering INSERM would put the French government on a collision course with the unions, warns Françoise Cavallé, an INSERM developmental biologist who's active in SNCS, a researchers' union. National institutes such as INSERM play an indispensable role as operators of

research, she says. “We don't feel like falling into the Anglo-Saxon model” in which universities compete for project-based funding.

Anger among the unions against the government was already on the rise. Sauvons la Recherche recently called on scientists to stop providing expert appraisals for the National Research Agency and the Agency for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education—two hotly contested innovations by the previous government—and demonstrations were planned in Paris and in Bordeaux for 27 November.

The panel's plans would create a tangle of practical and legal problems as well. Dissolution of the mixed units could create messy divorce fights, and Zerhouni's proposal to raise the age at which scientists get tenure—now often between 30 and 35—might run afoul of French laws that put limits on temporary labor contracts.

Still, says Zerhouni, France has little choice if it wants to stay competitive. He has been “very impressed” by the government's appetite for change; as to the unions' worries, he says: “I hope they realize this is professionalist. ... I think people are tired of these complicated lives.”

—MARTIN ENSERINK



Under protest. Sauvons la Recherche, which recently called on scientists to boycott the review process at two science agencies, will also fight “with all appropriate means” reforms proposed by a panel chaired by Elias Zerhouni.

job was to be very candid,” Zerhouni says.)

What's needed, the group concludes, is bold action. That includes setting up a strong, unified agency to fund all of the life sciences—presumably a new version of INSERM. If that agency also conducts research itself, those labs should be clearly set apart, as is the case with NIH's intramural labs, Zerhouni says. The mixed units should be abolished and, in most cases, be absorbed by the university they're physically based at; INSERM could simply send them grant money. To manage science well, the universities should have more flexibility, autonomy, and strategic direction, the report says.

A lot of that jibes neatly with what the government is already trying to do, a spokesperson for Pécresse says. A law passed last year gives universities the option of cutting themselves loose from state control, and so far, 20 of them have done so. Last month, Pécresse also announced a package of measures—including financial bonuses—to make science careers more attractive, another urgent priority listed by the review panel.

The central idea of consolidating the life sciences has been gaining currency for some time in France, says neurobiologist Alain

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