

## POLICY

# Puerto Rico's statistics agency in jeopardy

*Reorganization could threaten reliable, independent data about the island, critics say.*

BY **GIORGIA GUGLIELMI**

Puerto Rico's senators last week approved a plan to overhaul an independent statistics agency tasked with coordinating the collection and analysis of crucial data on the island. The reorganization will wreck the US territory's ability to produce credible data about itself, including updated estimates of the death toll from last year's Hurricane Maria, critics of the plan say.

The decision paves the way for the restructuring of several government agencies, including the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics (PRIS). To make it official, policymakers must now approve legislation dismantling the laws that established PRIS. Under Governor Ricardo Rosselló's plan to streamline government agencies, first introduced in January, PRIS would become an office in the Department of Economic Development and Commerce, which would contract the institute's duties to private companies.

But some fear that privatizing official statistics isn't in the island's best interests. "The private companies are going to be chosen by the government and we don't know how independent their leaders are going to be," says



Changes loom for body that handles statistics such as hurricane damage.

Mónica Feliú-Mójer, director of communications and science outreach at Science Puerto Rico, a non-profit group based in San Juan.

Another worry is that private companies might not distribute their data freely, or provide access to information on how they collected and analysed the numbers, says Steve Pierson, director of science policy at the American Statistical Association in Alexandria, Virginia.

Since PRIS began operating in 2007, it has worked to improve the quality of government

agencies' statistics: the institute trains statisticians in new methodologies, ensures that data collection and analysis meet international standards and helps the agencies to make their data publicly accessible.

PRIS has improved tracking of Puerto Rico's mortality rate, and it established a fraud-prevention system related to the US Medicaid health-insurance programme, saving the government millions of dollars.

But Rosselló disputes the agency's effectiveness. PRIS "has failed in establishing efficient data gathering procedures that produce reliable statistics", says Alfonso Orona, the governor's principal legal counsel. He says that outsourcing data collection and analysis will help to

address this.

It's likely that lawmakers will approve the legislation that would officially dismantle the institute, says Roberto Rivera, a statistician at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. Puerto Ricans are grappling with many issues, including the aftermaths of last year's hurricanes and a series of education and labour reforms, so PRIS is not a priority, he says. "If there's not enough pressure on the government, they'll get their way." ■

JOE RAEDLE/GETTY

## THERAPEUTICS

# Promising cancer drug hits snags

*Physicians struggle to identify which patients are likely to respond to cutting-edge therapy.*

BY **HEIDI LEDFORD**

Cancer specialists in the United States had high hopes last year when they gained approval for a new approach to treatment: a drug that targeted certain tumours regardless of where they first appeared in the body.

But clinicians and researchers are struggling to put that plan into practice. Although the drug itself works well against a variety of tumour types, there have been problems

with some of the tests used, which identify suitable tumours on the basis of certain molecular markers.

On 15 April at the American Association for Cancer Research annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois, researchers and representatives from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will discuss how best to tackle the issue. "If you get a false negative result, you're not going to give that patient the therapy, which is terrible," says Zsofia Stadler, an oncologist at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New

York City. "That's why there's such a debate."

The drug in question, pembrolizumab (Keytruda), works by firing up the body's immune responses against tumours. First approved by the FDA in 2014 to treat melanoma, it has since been given the go-ahead to treat a handful of other cancers, including lung cancer.

But last year, researchers reported that patients whose tumours had a disabled DNA-repair system also responded to the drug, regardless of where the tumour originated ▶