

Correspondence

Equalize access to medical advances

We contend that governments, intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations should ensure that all patients have access to 'orphan' drugs for rare diseases and to personalized medicine services, not just those who can afford to pay.

Within the United States and the European Union, tax incentives accrue to companies that are engaged in orphan-drug development. Start-ups and large multinational companies, which tend to seek enhanced returns for investors, could soon emerge as specialist providers of medicines to those who can afford personalized health-care options. Less-affluent patients would then be at risk of being excluded from advances in molecular diagnostics and in genetic-modification strategies for disease avoidance.

Technologies often outpace preparations for their application in health care, including in such fields as regenerative medicine (P. Marks and S. Gottlieb *N. Engl. J. Med.* **378**, 954–959; 2018). In this instance, too, we might have only a narrow window of opportunity to influence international cultures, regulations and investment to ensure equitable benefit for all. **Colum P. Dunne, Suzanne S. Dunne** *Graduate Entry Medical School and Centre for Interventions in Infection, Inflammation & Immunity (4i), University of Limerick, Ireland.* colum.dunne@ul.ie

Italy squeezes out wet biology research

Italy's wet biology research is in sharp decline, thanks to scarce funding and stifling bureaucracy. These forces are driving young scientists away from the laboratory bench and out of academia.

Basic experimental-biology research has been viewed as

a bad bet by Italian funding agencies over the past couple of decades. The situation is made worse by anti-corruption rules introduced last year by the government. These further complicate the already cumbersome administration procedures of public institutions. It can take weeks or even months to acquire a chemical reagent or a piece of equipment.

To boost their research credentials and improve their career opportunities, Italian biologists are therefore abandoning mechanistic bench research in favour of *in silico* investigations. These generate data rapidly and do not require expensive laboratory equipment or compliance with a tangle of safety regulations.

We need to reverse the situation so that future Italian governments want to invest in basic research. Although it is encouraging that the former Italian government earmarked a generous sum of €391 million (US\$456 million) for its 2017 3-year Research Projects of Relevant National Interest, this is currently a one-off investment that could be discontinued by future governments.

Expanding research-evaluation criteria from citation counting would help — for example, by including the intellectual property of a scientific work, its actual impact within a specific scientific community and the novelty of experimental approaches that maximize meaningful output. **Davide Zannoni** *University of Bologna Alma Mater Studiorum, Italy.* davide.zannoni@unibo.it

University fought a researcher's corner

A university's leaders might disown researchers in the face of allegations of unethical practice out of fear for the establishment's reputation (see, for example, *Nature* **558**, 13–14; 2018). Three years ago, I had the

opposite experience.

I was accused of animal maltreatment on an Italian national television programme, on the basis of images that had been taken illegally by an undercover activist. An animal-welfare organization brought charges against me to a tribunal in Rome, claiming that I had violated Italy's animal-protection law.

My university press office meticulously investigated all of my lab's papers and protocols with the university's official veterinary surgeon and wrote to the director of the TV programme, emphasizing that all procedures in the lab had conformed with the law. The press office also relayed a letter from me to all senior academic staff that set out my version of events.

Thanks to this support, I received an unexpectedly positive international response. The university formally conducted my legal defence at the tribunal. I have since received authorization from the Italian Ministry of Health to continue with my neuroscience research on non-human primates.

Reciprocal communication between researchers and their institutional leaders is crucial for resolving such disputes. My case illustrates how fair decisions can be reached by institutions in critical situations after careful assessment of the facts, unprejudiced by their potential impact on an institution's standing.

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Evaluation woes: DORA responds

We understand John Tregoning's frustration with the slow progress in eliminating undue reliance on journal impact factors in research assessment (*Nature* **558**, 345; 2018). However, his claim that no alternative has emerged overlooks the many examples

of good practice implemented by funders, learned societies, research institutes and individual scientists. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) showcases some of these (see <https://sfedora.org>).

There is no quick fix to the problems arising from the misapplication of impact factors in evaluating researchers. Assessing research across disciplines and geography is complex, and DORA has been careful to call out the need to address that complexity. Settling for the least-bad option is not the answer.

We agree with Tregoning's suggestions for diversifying measures of academic success. Examples include data and methods sharing, teaching, collegiality and public engagement. These are in line with initiatives that are under way. Universal agreement on best practices has yet to emerge, but progress is being made.

We appreciate the stresses of shaping a career in a highly competitive system, especially when the rules of the game are changing. But that change is necessary and will take time. DORA is committed to speeding things along so that we can provide the clarity Tregoning calls for. **See also page 23** **Anna Hatch** *DORA, Bethesda, Maryland, USA.* **Stephen Curry*** *DORA and Department of Life Sciences, Imperial College London, UK.* ahatch@ascb.org *S.C. declares competing non-financial interests; see go.nature.com/2tbl3us for details.

CONTRIBUTIONS

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