

A new Alliance: biomedical societies in Europe unite to support research

After years of stagnant finances for research, moves are under way to increase research funds in Europe

Health care for its ageing population has been recognized by the European Union as one of the great challenges ahead,¹ calling for innovative approaches in prevention, early disease detection, and treatment. Yet, the very foundations of innovation in health care, i.e. biomedical research and researchers, are under threat. European funding for biomedical research is insufficient, fragmented, and not competitive.

In 2002, the European Union made the commitment to gradually increase the share that the EU dedicates to research and development to 3% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2010.² Yet, at present, the EU budget research amounts to only 1.8% of its GDP.³ Furthermore, statistics recently published by UNESCO show that in 2002–07, European investment had stagnated.⁴ This is not enough to support the needed efforts in innovation, and this is particularly true for biomedical research.

Current investments by the EU also fall much below the pace set by the USA or Japan, who, respectively, dedicate 2.7% and 3.4% of their GDP to R&D.⁵ The EU should also take stock of the recent arrival of new competitors from Asia in the biomedical research area. China has made a priority of R&D, with an increase in investment of 160% between 2002 and 2007. In this landscape, Europe stands to lose its researchers and partners in innovation, to the benefit of the USA and Asia.

Fragmentation has long characterized the efforts of stakeholders in Europe to improve the support for biomedical research. This has now changed. The Alliance for Biomedical Research is uniting European biomedical societies representing health professionals and researchers in a joint call for more support of biomedical research in Europe. The European CanCer Organisation (ECCO), the European Respiratory Society (ERS), the European Association for the Study of Diabetes (EASD), and the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) officially founded the Alliance for Biomedical Research in Europe (Biomed Alliance)⁶ on 9 December 2010 in Brussels. Recently, four additional societies joined the Alliance: the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE), the European Haematology Association (EHA), the European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL), and the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology (ECNP).

The Alliance aims to facilitate and improve biomedical research in Europe, develop a framework for better training and mobility of young researchers in Europe, and improve public understanding of medical science in Europe. Through its actions, the Alliance intends to promote excellence in biomedical research and thereby improve the health and well-being of European citizens.

For its first action, the Alliance has two major goals: to increase the extent and quality of European funding for

biomedical research and to enhance the participation of researchers in the policy and decision-making at the EU level. Indeed, the Alliance welcomes the efforts made by the European Commission, through the on-going process of simplification, which aims at making participation easier, increase scientific and economic impact, and provide better value for money. Nevertheless, such proposals appear incomplete. In its contribution to the consultation launched by the European Commission with the Green Paper on a common strategic framework for EU research and innovation funding⁷ the Alliance will thus address the crucial need of raising the level of funding. In FP7, health research receives €6 billion, some 10% of the total EU research budget 2008–13. This is not commensurate with the scientific investment required for innovative research activities and is dramatically insufficient to face Europe's major competitors (for comparison, the USA invests on average 3.5 times more than the EU in health research).⁸ Furthermore, it will use the occasion to encourage bottom-up approaches, which would allow researchers to rightfully play an active role in the conception and development of innovative research.

Through its actions, the Alliance intends to improve the conditions for innovative European biomedical research and, thereby, also the health of European citizens. Too often the link between a strong and competitive research sector and a healthy and active population is overlooked. Investing in biomedical research will further strengthen the European Union competitiveness, directly, through enhanced research and related economic activities, as well as indirectly, by contributing to the health of an active work force. The Biomed Alliance wants to underline this win–win ratio to those, in Europe and in Member States, who make the decisions on research priorities and research budgets.

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Notes

1. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative Innovation Union—COM(2010) 546 final (http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/pdf/innovation-union-communication_en.pdf#view=fit&pagenode=none).
2. Presidency Conclusions Barcelona European Council, 15/16 March 2002 (http://ec.europa.eu/invest-in-research/pdf/download_en/barcelona_european_council.pdf).
3. Science, Technology and Competitiveness (ST&C) key figures report 2008/2009 (http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/pdf/keyfigures-report2008-2009_en.pdf).

4. UNESCO Science Report 2010: the current status of science around the world (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001899/189958e.pdf>).
5. Science, Technology and Competitiveness (ST&C) key figures report 2008/2009 (http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/pdf/keyfigures-report2008-2009_en.pdf).
6. <http://www.biomedeuropa.org/>.
7. http://ec.europa.eu/research/csfri/index_en.cfm.
8. In the USA, the NIH invests \$31.2 billion (~€21.5 billion) (www.nih.gov).

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