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Developing neuroscience

At SfN meeting, funders present plan to close research gap in low- and mid-income nations | By Alla Katsnleson

NE art of the growing effort to make research more eg ational consortium of government and nonprofit org nding neuroscience research funding in low- and mi ries, the group announced at the Annual Society for eting earlier this week.

Pu entist Gregory Quirk described the programs at a symposium on Tuesday (November 11). "The Society for Neuroscience is the de facto world organization of neuroscience," he said, "yet for years, it didn't do anything for developing countries." In the 6 years since he and Venezuelan colleague Gladys Maestre started the annual symposium, interest from both the society and from funding organizations has grown, he said, with new opportunities for training and collaboration emerging every year. "There's a sense now that you can't live in isolation, that it comes back to haunt us," Quirk said. "Funders are generally waking up to the fact that when everybody's better off, we are better off."

The symposium speakers represented the John E. Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health, the Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (INMHA-CIHR), the International Biomedicine Programme of the Wellcome Trust, the International Brain Research Organization (IBRO), and the United Nations University Biotechnology for Latin America and the Caribbean (BIOLAC) program in Venezuela. A Fogarty Center initiative, "Brain Disorders in the Developing World," will fund 28 new research projects this year, program director Kathleen Michels reported. IBRO, whose mission is to assist young investigators in the developing world, offered five times as many travel grants this year than in the past, according to Kwok-Fai So, chair of fellowships and grants. BIOLAC's Veronika Brundula described the organization's support for the creation of networks of collaborative research cells across Latin America and the Caribbean.

In addition, since last year, programs have started coordinating to offer a number of joint schemes. "We need to market these initiatives," says INMHA-CIHR Program Director Astrid Eberhart. Some of them are still so new that earmarked funds are yet to be fully used.

Almost all the grants described at the symposium require a collaborative element, which minimizes professional isolation and joins researchers in lower-income countries to a broader network of scientists. "The developed world has a key role to play, since a collaboration is usually the first step to sustaining a research program," Quirk said.

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Sustaining research programs in countries with economic difficulties presents unique challenges, Quirk said. First, there's the brain drain. While it is often essential for students to train abroad, even countries like Hungary, with a rich tradition in neuroscience, have almost no mechanism to help returning scientists to find positions or to do work of the same level they were able to do abroad, explained Hungarian neuroscientist Laszlo Acsady, who recently returned to Budapest with the help of a Wellcome 5-year senior fellowship grant. But, Quirk noted, "there aren't sufficient programs to pay for their return. Simply encouraging researchers to return is not enough, and funders are slowly getting the message that it's not enough to train, you have to both train and return."

Another difficulty is the financial discontinuity that comes with the economic instability of many of their countries. "Suddenly, the government will give us $100,000, but in other years, we don't even have $10,000 to run a lab," said Argentinean neuroscientist Lidia Szczupak. Small sums grants, she suggested, such as the Fogarty International Research and Collaboration Program Award, which provides up to $32,000 per year, can keep the research ball rolling in crunch periods.

While the amount of funding available is increasing significantly, said Michels, it is still so little as to be practically off the radar. Programs are also vulnerable to wider budget cuts. The biggest hurdle to progress is that unlike research areas such as tropical diseases, neuroscience is not a core program in the developing world. "People say, 'Why do you want to go to a developing country to do that when you can do it here?'" But in the last couple years, she said, "there is a recognition that it's important, that there is expertise there that needs to be developed." The aim, she said, "is not just [to] fund research, but [to] increase the capacity of scientists, institutions, and policymakers in the developing world."

Links for this article

A. Katsnelson, "Ethics, public education at SfN," *The Scientist,* November 13, 2003.
http://www.biomedcentral.com/news/20031113/07/

John E. Fogarty International Center
http://www.fic.nih.gov/

Institute of Neuroscience, Mental Health and Addiction, Canadian Institute of Health Research
http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/institutes/inmha/8602.shtml

International Biomedical Programmme, Wellcome Trust
http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/1/biosfgintint.html

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