

RESULTS YEAR 2004

It is a great pleasure to note that, for the 5th consecutive year, research activity at Gaslini has increased significantly, reaching unexpected results (Figure 1). These results put the Istituto Gaslini in the top list of Ministry of Health-funded research institutes, at a higher place than other institutes having more researchers and larger and better equipped laboratories. This “miracle” is mainly the outcome of the skill, professionalism and enthusiasm of researchers at Gaslini. In this respect, it is interesting to report the observations made by the International Scientific Committee in occasion of the last site visit: “The impressions of the Gaslini Institute that evolved during the 4th Annual Review of the International Scientific Committee were again quite favorable. The scientific excellence is maintained and in some cases has improved over the past year. The “impact factor” of the scientific publications of the Gaslini Institute scientific staff continues to escalate each year. However, impact factor alone does not adequately reflect the overall progress of the Institute. It is obvious that over the past year interactions, coordination, and collaboration among Gaslini scientists have continued to improve. In addition, there has been significant progress in certain specific areas. Of particular importance has been the recent inauguration of the Core Laboratory Facility. The establishment of such a facility was a major recommendation of a previous review of the International Scientific Committee and the Committee is pleased to see that this important initiative has come to fruition. The spirit and morale of the investigators for the most part remain extremely high. An obvious pride permeates the Institute and this pride has noticeably increased over the past 3 years. The annual reviews of the Committee have been well-received and a clear intention to continually improve is evident. The Gaslini Institute has always been excellent and among the very best in Europe. The Committee feels that the potential exists for the Gaslini Institute to become truly outstanding and to take its place among the best of such Institutes in the world.”

It is worth underlining that research results were obtained in a critical period characterized by a considerable reduction of resources allocated to research institutes by the Ministry of Health. In 2004, funding for current research decreased by about 10%, and further 7% decrease is expected for 2005 (when five additional Ministry of Health-funded research institutes were officially recognized, thus further reducing resources available for the already existing Institutions). These data are alarming, mainly for research institutes such as Gaslini, where the largest portion of research funds goes to pay permanent staff salaries. It is a critical situation, which I hope will be amended as soon as possible to avoid a dramatic collapse of advanced biomedical research in Italy. On the other hand, a positive aspect is the great determination expressed by the newly elected Ministry of Health in occasion of a meeting with the top managers of the different research institutes in facing the problem of the insufficient resources for health care and in particular for biomedical research. While waiting for better times, research at Gaslini must be continued at top levels and, if possible, it must be further increased. In addition to the laboratory of core facilities, which is already giving fruitful results, a new and very promising research line on mesenchymal stem cells is being started and the creation of a new laboratory devoted to this research field has been planned.

An essential contribution to avoid the decline of research was given, as in the past and even more, by the Gaslini Foundation, mainly thanks to the special competence, enthusiasm and enlightened patronage of Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, of Bruno Musso and of the Board of Directors. Not only this latter managed the patrimony excellently making important resources available to Gaslini Institute, but it also represented a point of reference for many researchers and clinicians at Gaslini. A very important initiative launched by the Gaslini Foundation was the creation of the “Prizes for Excellence in Research” and of the “Young Investigators Awards”. In 2004, the winners of the first prize category were Doctors Cristina Bottino, Mirco Ponzoni, Isabella Ceccherini, Cristina Morerio, and Angelo Ravelli. The winners of the second prize category were Doctors Gabriella Pietra, Fabio Pastorino, Paola Griseri, Irma Airoidi, and Gian Luca Caridi. These

annual prizes represent a very important stimulus for researchers at Gaslini and further demonstrate the interest of the Gaslini Foundation in promoting research of excellence.

The considerable increase in scientific production observed at Gaslini over the last few years is illustrated in Figure 1. From 1999 to 2004, the impact factor (IF) increased from 434 to 1067. It is worth underlining the following: 1) the number of papers, though increased from 193 to 248, did not grow as much as the IF. This means that the quality of publications improved considerably, as demonstrated by the mean IF, which increased from about 2 to more than 4; 2) in the last 5 years, a limited number of new researchers have been recruited, either as Gaslini research staff members or as University professors under special agreement with Gaslini Institute. I am very pleased to underline that, among the 10 more productive researchers at Gaslini (Table 1), 5 are recent acquisitions (hence good choices have been made!). However, this fact alone does not explain the doubled scientific production. The result obtained reflects a growth that can be recorded in many fields, a fact of major importance in a children's hospital which, by its nature, is multidisciplinary (Figure 2 and Table 2).

Since it is well known that excellence in research is a driving force towards excellence in patient's care, Gaslini has all the necessary requirements to better exploit this quality and look at the future with more optimism. So let's build the future of Gaslini on research and on continuing innovation! This approach, together with an accurate planning involving all members of Gaslini, will make it possible not only to avoid decay, but to place Gaslini Institute among the top international children's hospitals.

I would finally underline that the merit of the research results obtained should be awarded not only to researchers, but also to Gaslini top managers, who favoured the creation of new laboratories and activities and supported the Scientific Direction in periods characterized by progressively decreasing resources.

Lorenzo Moretta