

Medical research and development

To educate is an exciting and highly demanding challenge faced by involved professionals. This is irrespective of the age or ability of the student or whether education is at a primary, secondary or tertiary level. Infrastructural, administrative and financial resources can facilitate matters but much depends on the human resources at hand. Ultimately, the outcome of an educational system is best measured by the level of education achieved by the citizens of a particular country. The provision of well trained reliable professionals to service a country is one criterion that can be utilised but most certainly should not be the sole yardstick by which educational achievement is measured. The nurturing of intellectual activity and the channelling of such activities into research and development on a cultural, economic and national basis must surely be the ultimate goal.

Any tertiary educational establishment therefore has to ensure that its academic body contributes to the development of a country. The University of Malta Medical School is no exception. The Medical School has a long tradition of service provision that spans more than three centuries. Its graduates have excelled both locally and overseas and over the years gone into different areas of specialisation both in the basic and the clinical sciences. One enduring issue, however, has been the difficulty in retaining the larger proportion of these excellent graduates, those engaged in education, research and/or clinical practice. The situation has escalated. Previously we lost graduates who had proceeded abroad for postgraduate training and then opted to continue to pursue their career and profession overseas. We now see newly graduated doctors leaving our shores to work in EU countries such as the UK. This in itself is international endorsement of the excellence of our educational programme and of our graduates. However, regrettably, in the near future, this will translate into a shortage of doctors, not just at specialist level, but also at the house officer, senior house officer and registrar level, that will have a negative impact on service provision both at hospital level and in the community.

The reasons for this brain drain are multiple and in order to reverse this situation, investment in human resources and infrastructure is crucial. Regrettably none of these issues have been tackled. Career progression in Malta leaves much to be desired. Financial remuneration remains appalling, working conditions are far from satisfactory and the establishment of postgraduate training programmes has not been given the requisite importance by the relevant Ministries and healthservice providers. This policy of indifference can only be described as short-sighted and irresponsible.

Those graduates who opt for a career in academic medicine are similarly faced with a dearth of opportunities predominantly due to

lack of funding. Academics at the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery need to be in a position to compete for EU funding for research and development in academic and clinical medicine. The way forward is expansion in the type and level of expertise that is locally available, increasing the number of highly trained professionals and providing an infrastructure to launch new initiatives and enable further bolstering of the economy and of development. To this aim, the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery has encouraged the development of MSc, MPhil and PhD programmes in addition to the undergraduate and postgraduate training programmes for both academic staff and graduates in the clinical sciences.

Over the years, the development of postgraduate training programmes necessitated the provision of teaching and laboratory facilities. The Faculty has an excellent track record of maximal utilisation of its scant resources by the various departments for the benefit of all. The University in response to a request from the Faculty approved the establishment of an *in vivo* and cell culture research facility to be designated the Allied Research Unit. Meanwhile in recognition of the increasing importance of molecular biology, pharmacology and genetics, as well as the need for translational research from bench to bedside, the building and refurbishing of state-of-the-art laboratory facilities was also approved. These laboratories are now nearing completion. Members of the Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics played a key role for a number of years in the design and planning of the laboratories. Recently, however, the facilities were earmarked for the use of a number of different institutions. In order to maximise utilisation of the available space, careful planning and scheduling is critical.

The Faculty of Medicine is proud of the achievement of its postgraduate students and is committed to further increasing the quality and capacity of its postgraduate programmes. This comes with a serious commitment on the part of members of Faculty to expand ongoing research programmes and establish centres of excellence. A number of grant applications have been successful in the past. We look forward to future opportunities in research and development in collaboration with other centres, both national and international, public and private, which will enable this country to meet the escalating demands in the health and the industrial sector.

It is to be hoped that the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery and the University as a whole will have the support of the relevant administrative and regulatory bodies in Malta to ensure that these aims are achieved.

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Editor