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## Prescription for change

Health research in Italy is in desperate need of a fresh start.

These are painful times for Livia Turco, the Italian health minister. A member of the centre-left Democratic Party, Turco has been caught in a web of power politics that has led her to nominate Enrico Garaci to serve a third term as president of the ISS, an important, publicly funded health-research institute in Rome. The nomination is seen by many as problematic because Garaci has not fully embraced the open and competitive peer review that Italian research policy must adopt if it is to compete more effectively with other scientific powers of comparable size.

On 6 November, the Italian Senate's health committee took the unusual move of rejecting the nomination. Legally, Turco is obliged to take note of the Senate's view -and also that of the chamber of deputies, a committee of which approved the nomination on 24 October - but she does not have to follow it. By withdrawing the nomination, she may lose political face, but by insisting on it, she will undermine her government's main objective, which is to cajole Italian governance into a new era of meritocracy and openness.

The ISS is in some ways Italy's equivalent of the Pasteur Institute in Paris. It employs around 1,500 scientists who work in areas such as vaccines, stem cells and genomics, and its €100million (US\$145 million) annual budget is mostly absorbed by salaries - although the institute also coordinates some extramural projects.

The way in which Garaci has administered these projects has often upset other senior scientists. Their discontent is currently focused on €3 million allocated to stem-cell research this year. Stem-cell researchers have complained to Turco in a letter to which she has not replied. Newspapers have pointed out that Garaci was a member of the health-ministry committee that helped decide that the ISS would distribute the stem-cell funds. Moreover critics fear that Garaci's own doctrinaire brand of Catholicism - he is a member of the conservative Science and Life group - may prevent the small programme from supporting work that would be permitted under the law, but of which he may personally disapprove.

**On balance, Garaci lacks the confidence among his peers that a director of the ISS needs. Turco should withdraw his nomination and follow the procedure adopted successfully by her colleague, research minister Fabio Mussi, in filling top positions. She should set up an independent search committee to draw up a shortlist of candidates from which she can select a nominee, who would then have the full confidence of Italy's biomedical research community.**