

Opus Dei works for the future of Italian biomedical science

The creation of top-quality medical schools may be more than just a desire in Italy's still over centralized research and university system. The imposing Palazzo Lancellotti in the very heart of Rome, just opposite Vatican City, is home to the headquarters of the "Campus biomedico (CBM)".

Founded in 1991, CBM hopes to become the cradle of a new breed of highly qualified physicians. What most makes it unique, however, is that it is the offspring of Opus Dei (literally, "Work of God"), a controversial conservative religious organization affiliated with the Roman Catholic church.

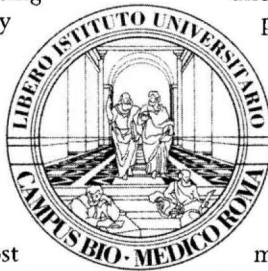
Founded in Madrid in 1928 by the now-beatified priest Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer, Opus Dei has more than 90,000 active members from 90 different nations. Following its founder's dictum that "any decorous and honest work may convert into a divine activity," the organization has always given major consideration to propagating its philosophy through academic circles. It has set up more than ten universities and medical schools in different parts of the world, perhaps the best known being the University of Navarra, Spain.

Opus Dei's latest endeavor, CBM, is patterned on the best North American medical centers, thus breaking with the tradition of Italy's much-criticized university environment, in which students often claim to be "abandoned" - taught by inappropriately qualified and frequently absent professors. "The aim [of CBM] is to provide superior academic education and training combined with distinctive basic and clinical research programmes," says Raffaello Cortesini, a pioneer in organ transplantation in Italy and chairman of the CBM's International Scientific Committee.

However, the goal of Opus Dei's philosophy of "sanctification of work" applied to medical practice makes CBM more than just another medical school. "An essential feature of our mission is the spiritual and moral formation of future physicians, which implies a total commitment to the dignity of human beings and the strong belief in the inviolability of innocent human life at all stages of de-

velopment from conception to natural death," says Giulio Marinuzzi, rector of CBM. Although this makes some people uneasy, CBM is committed to preserving those ideals worldwide. "It is one of our principal aims to take constructive part in the debate within the international scientific community on all areas which challenge the ethical values in the medicine of the future," says Cortesini.

Just as Opus Dei recognizes no geographic boundaries, neither does CBM, which is engaged in attracting an international faculty. The official language of CBM is English, in keeping with current scientific practice. CBM also offers students from developing nations the opportunity of attending the school. "So



far, we have twenty students coming from countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and the Philippines," says Cortesini, who adds that a unique feature of CBM is that these students are specifically equipped with the necessary skills to solve problems in their home countries.

Immediate future plans for CBM include the construction of the 500 bed university teaching hospital, containing a major trauma center, a geriatric center and a center for the study of violence. To achieve this, CBM's board of directors have begun collecting funds from throughout Italy. Currently, major funding is provided by the "Friends of CBM" association and the "Alberto Sordi Foundation." But CBM has begun looking overseas as well. Within a few months a foundation will be set up in New York to seek funding there as well. "We are confident of propagating successfully our mission and goals," says Henry Staley, founding member of the Foundation.

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Necessary legislation or stupid pet trick?

Recent US Congressional hearings on pet protection, prompted by the threat of pet thieves abducting Fido and selling him to the local research laboratory, have resulted in proposed legislation that would eliminate the specialized animal dealers that supply larger dogs used in orthopedic and cardiovascular research.

"All of us have been troubled by allegations that some class B dealers (licensed intermediate animal handlers) may be stealing animals outright, adopting them through 'free to a good home' ads, or turning a blind eye to the animal's original source," says Michael V. Dunn, a representative of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the government agency responsible for overseeing the treatment of animals used in research. Such practices are serious violations of the Animal Welfare Act, but appear to be fairly common for some dealers, according to testimony given at the congressional hearing. In response to the reports, US Representatives Charles Canady (Republican, Florida) and

John Fox (Republican, Pennsylvania) each put forth pet protection bills that would eliminate class B dealers.

"The only thing this legislation will do is prevent research facilities from receiving any animals from pounds or USDA dealers," says Jorge Galante of the department of Orthopedic Surgery at Rush Medical College in Chicago. In 1995, class B dealers supplied approximately 22,000 dogs to researchers.

Dogs considered "class B" are generally older, larger, and more genetically diverse than dogs purposely bred for research. These characteristics make class B dogs essential for such things as developing hip and knee joint prosthetics, as well as some cardiovascular surgical techniques, according to researchers.

The USDA already requires class B dealers to keep extensive records on each dog in order to prevent a private citizen's pet from ending up in a research laboratory. However, recent inspections

