Special Article

Visit to the Gastroenterology INSERM Units of France
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On personal invitation, which is here gratefully acknowledged, of Professor C. Burg, the general director of the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM), I had the privilege and pleasure to spend the month of October 1976 in France touring Gastroenterology INSERM Units. The INSERM is the French analog of the National Institute of Health (NIH) in the United States. The purpose of my visit was to see the organization and performance of these research units, compare them with what I know about the gastroenterology research laboratories in the United States, and exchange scientific information with the French researchers on the topics of mutual interest. Professor Serge Bonfils was chosen with his kind approval as the host of my visit. His INSERM Unit (#10) at the Hospital Bichat in Paris, was elected as the "Host Unit" where my visit started and ended, and where the visits to the other units were organized. I owe him sincere gratitude for his guidance and help. After completing my tour, I was left with the feeling that what I had seen would be of interest to American gastroenterologists. Dr. John Farrar, the editor of this journal, encouraged me to review my tour and my impressions.

Five elements constitute the basic foundations and centers of the French medical research: (a) INSERM, (b) Institut Pasteur, (c) Commissariat of the Atomic Energy, (d) CNRS-National Center of Scientific Research, and (e) the universities. The two first institutions are directly dependent on the Ministry of Industry and Research, and the last two are supported by the Ministry of the Universities.

Experimental medical research, begun in the 19th-century France of Pasteur and Claude Bernard, initially was developed in the Pasteur Institute and in the few existing laboratories of leading hospitals and universities of France and French colonies. Governmentally subsidized research was a later addition and coincided with the formation of the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and its Section of Experimental Medicine centralized in the National Institute of Hygiene. After the World War II, the Institute, directed by Prof. Louis Bugnard (one of the great promoters of French medical research), was found to require extensive reorganization. In 1964, therefore, the National Institute of Hygiene was transformed into the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM) by Raymond Marcellin, who at that time was the Minister of Public Health and Population. Shortly thereafter, in 1965, INSERM received its constitution, developed through the joint efforts of a group led by Prof. Georges Mathé, then consultant to the Ministry of Health, and now head of the Research Unit of Cancerology and Immunogenetics at Villejuif, near Paris. INSERM has since developed into a highly important medical research organization of the French government under the guidance of two dedicated directors, Prof. Eugene Aujaleu and presently Prof. Constant Burg. In its efforts to expand French medical science, the INSERM administration has been aided by Prof. Jean Bernard, the President of the Administrative Council of the...
INSERM and the leading hematologist of France, as well as members of its 8 scientific commissions, who advise the administration in some 70 areas of medical research.

In the 12 years of its existence, the development of INSERM has been impressive, as shown by the steady increase of its staff and budget. In 1964, INSERM had 452 researchers and 613 engineers, technicians, and administrative and auxiliary employees, while in 1974 the staff grew to 1019 researchers and 1785 auxiliary personnel.

The total budget of INSERM in 1964 was 54 million francs, 22 million of which were provided for financing constructions and long-term investment contracts, and 32 million to cover the cost of maintaining the research units and research groups. In 1974, corresponding figures increased to 48 and 198 million, respectively, ie, a total 5 times greater than that of only 10 years ago. Despite inflation, these figures indicate a rapid growth of the INSERM system.

INSERM has built and developed 74 research units located in its own buildings or in hospital wings all over the country and has organized and subsidized 55 research groups working in the laboratories of various French universities and hospitals. About 95% of the total subsidy to INSERM is derived from the Ministry of Health. Of this, approximately 1/6 is used for construction and equipment, another 1/6 for the support of individual research grants, and about 1/2 for the salaries of investigators and other personnel connected with intramural INSERM programs. Of the funds allocated for the purchase of equipment, more than 90% has been used for the equipment assigned to the programs concentrated within the INSERM units. It should be noted, however, that INSERM also pays part or all of the salaries to some investigators in the laboratories belonging to the CNRS system, Pasteur Institute, or universities. Similarly, the laboratories of INSERM are open to investigators supported by the CNRS system, universities, or scientific societies, such as the Association Claude Bernard.

INSERM also subsidizes medical research in France by means of so-called “Actions Thématiques Programmées” (ATP). These are small grants which do not exceed the amount of 45,000 francs (about $10,000) per year and are awarded on a competitive basis to researchers with the aim of supporting individual research projects, usually for 3 years. They are allocated only for research projects on some of the 15–20 “hot topics” selected by