Cell Biology in Italy

History

It is probably fair to trace the beginnings of Italian cell biology to two prominent scientific figures of the beginning of the last century, before the term cell biology was coined: Camillo Golgi, author of the first discovery of an intracellular organelle, the Golgi complex, and of major breakthroughs in the fields of neuroanatomy and infectious diseases; and Giulio Bizzozero, a noted histologist and the discoverer of blood platelets and of the properties of bone marrow. They and their students, some of whom achieved international fame, established scientific schools, the influence of which are felt even today.

Another important contribution to modern Italian cell biology came from American laboratories, and particularly the laboratory of George Palade, where Italian students and postdocs learned the concepts and methodologies of the nascent discipline in the 1960s and 1970s. Upon returning to Italy, they established influential laboratories and research centers that helped to nucleate the contemporary Italian cell biology establishments.

Italian Cell Biology Today

The contemporary Italian cell biology scene is fairly rich and varied, with centers of excellence scattered across the country. One could say that the Italian powerhouse in the biomedical area is the city of Milan, where several major private research institutions hosting prominent cell biology groups operate, such as the European Institute of Oncology (*Instituto Europeo di Oncologia*; IEO), the FIRC Institute of Molecular Oncology (*Istituto FIRC di Oncologia Molecolare*; IFOM), the San Raffaele Foundation Department of Biotechnological Research (*Dipartimento di Ricerca Biotecnologica*; DIBIT), the Humanitas Research Hospital (*Istituto Clinico Humanitas*), and others, together with large universities and the institutes of the Italian National Research Council (*Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche*; CNR). However, other cities, including Naples, Rome, Padua, Turin, Bologne, Genova, and Bari come close, in that they too support private research foundations as well as large universities and CNR centers that host excellent groups of cell biologists.

As can be seen from the above short survey, a notable feature of the Italian cell biology scene is the presence of numerous private nonprofit research centers. This represents perhaps a response to the financial and organizational difficulties of the governmental institutions. The Italian private research foundations are often competitive at the world level.

The Italian funding system for cell biology, and indeed for biology in general, differs somewhat from that of most western countries. A key role is played by two large charities, the Italian Association for Cancer Research (*Associazione Italiana per la Ricerca sul Cancro*; AIRC) and the Telethon Foundation (*Fondazione Telethon*) for research into genetic diseases, as well as by a host of other, smaller but active and well-organized, charities. European grants also represent a key source of research funds for several laboratories. Governmental funding agencies, which are usually the main source of support for research in other countries, are less effective in Italy. They are widely criticized for the scarcity of their funding and for the lack of stringent meritocratic criteria in their funding decisions. However, lately they have been making serious efforts to improve their performance.

Altogether, although smaller and less well funded than the communities of other European countries of comparable size and wealth, the Italian cell biology community is vibrant and rich, with numerous peaks of excellence in many areas, including cellular immunology, cellular and molecular oncology, and fundamental cell biology.

Internal Organization and International Links

The Italian cell biology community has formally constituted a society known as the Italian Association for Cell Biology and Differentiation (*Associazione Italiana per la Biologia Cellulare e il Differenziamento*; ABCD; www.fisv.org/index.php/en/abcd). The ABCD is part of the Italian Life Sciences Federation (*Federazione Italiana Scienze della Vita*; FISV; www.fisv.org), which includes many of the Italian biomedical societies. The FISV organizes large annual meetings, which represent the main Italian scientific biomedical events.

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In addition, the ABCD organizes smaller special interest meetings on subjects like (in 2010): Mechanisms of Signal Transduction, Stem Cell Development and Regenerative Medicine, Membrane Trafficking and Organelle Biogenesis, Cell Stress, Survival and Apoptosis, and the National Reunion of ABCD Postdocs.

FISV and FISV members have active roles in European research activities, such as in the organization of the meetings of the large European Molecular Biology Organization and the Federation of European Biochemical Societies, and in initiatives of the European community.

The ABCD has informal links with the ASCB through shared membership and the participation of many Italian cell biologists in ASCB meetings. ■

—Alberto Luini, Telethon Institute of Genetics and Medicine

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