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Report by the External Advisory Committee of the Instituto de Investigação em Ciências da Vida e Saúde

The External Advisory Committee of the Life and Health Sciences Research Institute (ICVS) visited the Institute on December 11th 2009. On that occasion the Committee attended presentations by the Research Domain Coordinators, visited the newly opened facilities of the ICVS, and met with the Direction, research staff, post-docs and students. In this report we summarize our opinion about the accomplishments in the past two years and offer some suggestions for the future.

We note the achievements of the ICVS for scientific creativity and productivity, across a spectrum of studies covering the 3 Domains of Research. We are happy to record the high quality of the research being conducted at the Institute. It is also gratifying to register the determined and intelligent way in which all the scientist at the Institute have been able to overcome the limitations imposed on their activities by a somewhat erratic schedule in the Calls for Grant Applications by the Ministry of Research. In spite of this limitation the scientists at the ICVS have published over 170 international articles in peer-reviewed publications, some of them in very high impact journals. It is of particular notice that those very high impact publications represent for the most part research carried out, primarily or exclusively, at the Institute.

The new resources, the containment level 3 laboratory and the animal model facilities for behavioral and surgical studies, are truly impressive accomplishments. These modern laboratories, excellently equipped and fully functional, will have a very significant impact in the research at the ICVS. We encourage the Health School and the relevant authorities to maintain constant support for the operation of these outstanding facilities, including funds for their expansion, should future developments justify it.

The goal of the External Advisory Committee is to help the ICVS to realize its full potential in a highly competitive research environment. ICVS will need to develop appropriate strategies regarding the scientific areas where their efforts should be concentrated. Judging from the output, be it measured in the number of scientific publications or the number of Masters' and PhD Thesis successfully defended, the Institute has clearly followed a winning strategy. We encourage the staff to continue in this

way, always taking care to avoid dispersing their (necessarily limited) resources on too many research programs.

Another crucial issue to determine the success of any research institute is the recruitment of scientific personnel. It is of course the aim of any recruiter to hire top quality researchers and the ICVS has clearly been very successful in that endeavor. But it is also very important that the scientific staff (including PIs, Post-Docs and Students) interact easily and can devote their best efforts to fruitful collaborations. This is precisely the impression we got from our visit and the leadership of the ICVS should be commended for fostering such a pleasant and productive working environment. Praise is also due to all the PIs at the ICVS for the attitude displayed by their collaborators: the conversations with the post docs and students revealed a strong "*Esprit de Corps*", built on a firm conviction that this is an excellent centre for them to be educated and to develop as researchers.

Finally, we should like to encourage all the scientists at the ICVS to pay constant attention to three issues that can negatively influence their research activities. The solutions to these problems are not entirely on their hands, but they should permanently be aware of their existence and grab all opportunities to resolve them, or at least mitigate, their impact:

A) The Animal Facilities

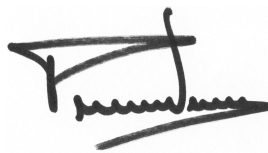
Unfortunately it has not yet been possible to obtain sufficient funds to build animal facilities of adequate dimensions to support the research activities of all the groups at the ICVS. Although the scientists have been able to cover their present needs by keeping the old facility open and adapting some rooms in the new building, this is far from satisfactory. It is imperative that a permanent long-term solution is found to this problem, so as not to impair the continuation of research at the ICVS.

B) Online subscriptions

A properly functioning Institute requires a well organized Library, with online access to all major scientific journals in all areas of research at the Institute. Although the situation at the ICVS has significantly improved over the past two years it is still far from ideal. We encourage the ICVS to develop strategies, for example by negotiating matching funds from research agencies, to fund a good set of subscriptions to major scientific journals. This is very important to allow adequate training and education of students and post-docs.

C) Teaching responsibilities

As in all academic research institutes, there is a trade-off between the time allocated to research and the time that has to be devoted to teaching duties. A proper balance is often difficult to obtain, but the ICVS has so far managed to do so and obtained substantial benefits from the interactions with colleagues in the medical school and in the area hospitals. We recommend that the scientists at the ICVS continue to pay careful attention to this point and avoid taking on excessive duties outside of their research activities.



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