

much to blame as the embarrassment of others; those most in need of help are notoriously the least appealing. But it would be a bad business if the occasional violence of the occasional discharged psychiatric patient were to lead by stealth to an unwinding of the successes of the past several decades. That the amount of violence has become obtrusive is largely a measure of how much psychiatric illness there is. And governments, which may be blamed for many things, cannot be blamed for that. What they will be blamed for is an abandonment of an enlightened framework for the management of the psychiatrically disabled in the face of public clamour, and because the costs (now apparent) are not easily affordable. Their best course, having coined the phrase 'care in the community', is to remind the community of its duties of care and compassion. □

Clean drugs for Italy?

Italy should avoid going to extremes in its attempts to reform the system of drug registration and pricing.

THE callousness of the malign ring of corruption centring on Italy's Ministry of Health (see page 663) defies belief. Former health minister Francesco De Lorenzo has apparently been colluding with drug companies for many years to fix unfair drug prices and to guarantee pharmaceuticals with no proven benefit a place in the national formulary. The shame extends into Italy's universities, where several prominent professors have been accused of accepting bribes to give the right 'advice'. Italians can only be thankful that the process of screening drugs for toxicity took place at a much earlier stage, distant from the influence of politicians.

The new minister for health, Christian Democrat Mariapia Garavaglia, now has the task of creating from scratch 'clean' systems for drug registration and drug pricing. But if she is not careful, overreaction to the corruption may lead to future problems. The recent revelations have led to such a climate of disgust and distrust that Garavaglia has said that she will not create another commission for the fixing of pharmaceutical prices. Instead, she wants to establish a system of free pricing, presumably to be dictated by the open market. The Department of Industry, which by law has to agree all prices, is not of the same mind. Much of the national drug bill is reimbursed by the government, and it believes that the government should therefore have some say in the matter.

Italy should not jump out of the frying pan into the fire. For too long, taxpayers have been asked to foot the bill for overpriced drugs, many of them in any case medically ineffective. They should not now be asked to foot a bill whose size is dictated entirely by the commercial interests of a national industry, which has itself not emerged squeaky clean from the corruption scandal, without any form of government control. The Ministry of Industry has already put together a panel of experts whose job is to decide on criteria for price fixing. The Department of Health should listen to the panel's advice and be prepared to act in the best interests of Italy's health service. □

Irish funding disappears

Ireland needs a champion in the government who will look to the future of the science base.

OVER the past decade, European researchers have come to expect less and less support from their governments. But it is not often that a government agency baldly decides to make savings by stopping all new funding for basic research. This is how Eolas, Ireland's major research funding agency, chose to solve its cash problems earlier this year.

We now hear that a (risibly) small amount of money has been pulled out of the hat to defend basic research (see page 662). But this gesture, hard fought for within the agency, cannot disguise the message behind the original decision: that basic research is held in disregard by Irish policy-makers. Few even bother to pretend that such research is worthwhile. Some go as far as to say that "those university types have had it good for too long".

But worse may be to come. Ireland's Ministry of Employment and Enterprise, to which Eolas is responsible, last month indicated to the Committee of Heads of Irish Universities that it no longer wants to fund basic research in the future. Its budget will be directed entirely to applied research.

As part of a major reorganization, Eolas is being merged this autumn with the Industrial Development Agency (Ireland). Eolas's original optimism that the merger will make no practical difference to its operations is in doubt. No-one from the Eolas board, and no scientist, has been appointed to the Forbairt. Its new director, Eileen O'Mara Walsh, is chairperson of the Great Southern Hotel Group.

So if the Department of Employment and Enterprise no longer takes responsibility for basic research, who will? Although the government agrees that a basic research base should be maintained, in practice a big question mark hangs over the future. The most natural home, the Department of Education, has no plans to create a research programme. It has not been given the resources. (The Department of Health still has, of course, its rather inadequate budget for biomedical research — but even this is having to stretch further to cover new areas such as epidemiology.)

Science has no champion in the Irish government. There is no ministry with special responsibility for science, no research council, not even a major lobby. Ireland has no research institutes analogous to Germany's Max Planck or France's CNRS; almost all basic research is carried out in universities. After years of being ignored, the Committee of Heads of Irish Universities is now demanding more say in policy, but it may be too late. Its main demand is that universities be considered a 'resource for industry'.

Ireland is a poor country. No one blames the government for wanting to improve its industrial competitiveness as soon as possible. And everyone would agree that research for and by industry is fundamental to this aim. But Ireland must also look further than the next few years. Allowing its research base, such as it is, simply to fade away will seed a much greater potential for economic failure in the future. □