

Q&A: Italy's new research boss wants to reward fresh talent

By Edwin Cartlidge Feb. 18, 2016, 2:00 PM

Massimo Inguscio says research managers should be free to hire the best people.

Vittorio Tulli

ROME—On Saturday, Massimo Inguscio will take over from engineer Luigi Nicolais as president of Italy's largest research organization, the National Research Council (CNR). Inguscio, a well-known optical physicist at the University of Florence, has experience leading smaller research bodies, most recently Italy's National Institute of Metrological Research, but heading the multidisciplinary CNR will be a step up. He will have an annual budget of about €1 billion and more than 8000 employees in his charge, many of whom are unhappy at being continually handed short-term contracts.

"Inguscio is an excellent scientist and also a very good manager," says Giovanni Bignami, a former president of Italy's National Institute for Astrophysics here. "But he will have his hands full dealing with personnel. He will have to talk to the unions while also making himself heard in the ministry."

ScienceInsider talked to Inguscio on Tuesday, a day after research minister Stefania Giannini had tapped him for the new job. Questions and answers have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: Italy spends only about 1.25% of its gross domestic product on research. Does CNR struggle for funding?

A: Almost all of the CNR's budget is used to pay salaries and basic expenses such as electricity, which means there are virtually zero funds for research. Twenty years ago there was money to upgrade existing facilities or to buy new equipment, be it a new magnet or modern tools for nanotechnology. But now we can't do that.

Q: The government's 2016 budget contains €100 million for about 850 new university researchers. Is that a good sign?

A: It is a welcome, if small, reversal compared to the general trend of decreasing finances. But these resources must be used wisely. In Italy there is no multiyear strategy. Hirings can be blocked for many years and then unfrozen suddenly. That leads to people being recruited just because they are on a temporary contract, and not necessarily because they are the best person for the job. In fact, current employment law stipulates that new jobs must be filled by people who have previously won a place on a public waiting list, even if they did so 10 years ago. That has nothing to do with research.

Q: What do you intend to do about that?

A: Research managers must be free to choose people on the basis of merit. The presidents of research institutions are asking the government to start up a process of tenure track, as happens in other countries. New recruits would go through a trial period, and if they prove themselves good enough [they] would then gain a permanent position. We need to have a serious hiring policy that doesn't rely on personal contacts.

Q: Many Italian scientists work abroad. Is that a serious problem?

A: I am not worried about the brain drain, it is normal that people go overseas to work. The problem is that researchers don't come to Italy. The movement is only in one direction.

Q: Can the flow be reversed?

A: Three years ago I became director of the CNR's physical sciences department. While there, new efforts were made to attract foreign winners

of Consolidator Grants awarded by the European Research Council, but of about 10 people that we hoped to recruit only one came. Someone comes not only because there is a place and a wage but also because they can hire postdocs and get projects up and running. I hope that the government can restart Italian research on the basis of excellence and meritocracy.

Q: There have been protests against the second round of a nationwide research assessment program known as the VQR. Some scientists say the procedures penalize those, for example, who favor teaching over research. How do you view this issue?

A: I think the VQR is of fundamental importance. It allows us to allocate funds to places that merit them and therefore to hire good people. It is a new methodology and there are bound to be errors, but some people are trying to sabotage the system by withholding their research papers from the evaluation. That doesn't seem a very intelligent thing to do because they will be deemed to be inactive and so reduce funding for their institutes. If the system has problems, we have to try and fix it.

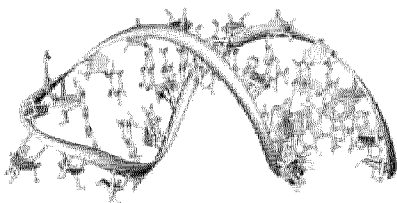
Posted in: Europe, Scientific Community

DOI: 10.1126/science.aaf4081

Edwin Cartlidge

Twitter

More from News



For RNA paper based on a computer game, authorship creates an identity crisis



National parks could one day have Siri-style guides



How cat hair brought down a pair of art forgers

[View the discussion thread.](#)

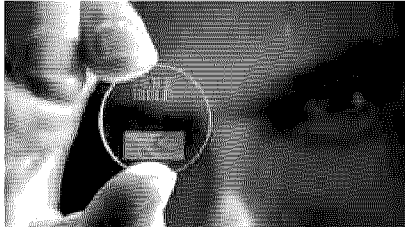
Follow News from Science



Tweets by @ScienceInsider

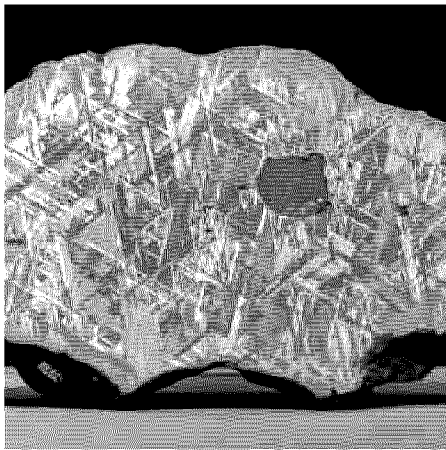
Latest News

Sifter



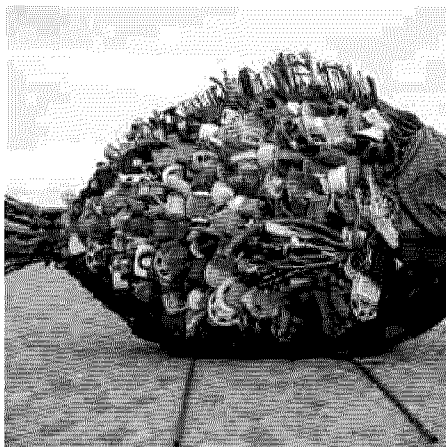
'Superman memory crystals' could store humanity's data indefinitely

Feb. 18, 2016



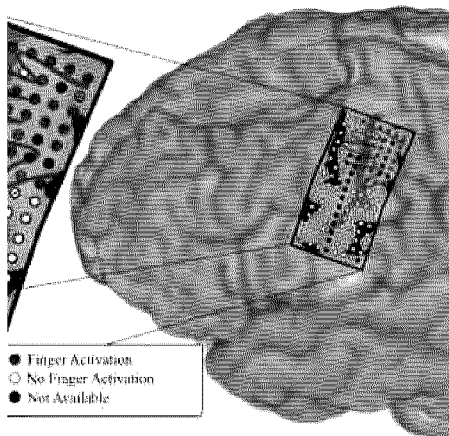
Missing Antarctic meteorites may be buried by the sun

Feb. 17, 2016



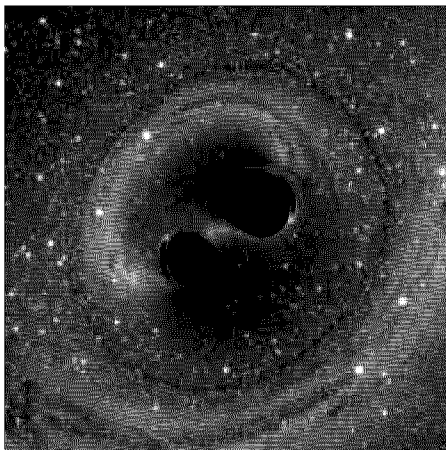
Will plastic really outweigh fish in the ocean by 2050?

Feb. 16, 2016



Mind-controlled prosthetic limb lets patients wiggle fingers

Feb. 16, 2016



Watch: Chirp if you love gravitational waves—these scientists did

Feb. 12, 2016

More Sifter

Science

19 February 2016

Astronomy

Vol 351, Issue 6275, Pages 824-a-886Building the biggest eye in space



Astronomy

The next big eye

Microbiology

The right gut microbes help infants grow

Genetics

Pocket DNA sequencers make real-time diagnostics a reality

Neuroscience

Barcoding the brain

Science and Policy

Pitching science: A history of Obama's research budgets

[Table of Contents](#)

- [About us](#)
- [Journals](#)
- [Leadership](#)
- [Team members](#)
- [Work at AAAS](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Advertising kits](#)
- [Custom publishing](#)
- [For subscribers](#)
- [Site license info](#)
- [For members](#)
- [International](#)
- [Chinese](#)
- [Japanese](#)
- [Help](#)
- [Access & subscriptions](#)
- [Reprints & permissions](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Stay Connected](#)



© 2016 American Association for the Advancement of Science. All rights Reserved. AAAS is a partner of HINARI, AGORA, OARE, Patientform, CHORUS, CLOCKSS, CrossRef and COUNTER.

- [Terms of Service](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Copyright](#)