



Maestro of scientists

By Chris Tachibana

Perspectives on research and collaboration from an European Medical Research Council leader

Dr. Liselotte Højgaard sees herself as the conductor of an orchestra. Instead of musicians, she directs the European Union's most influential medical researchers, although she is modest about her role.

- They play in tune, so I let them decide for themselves what they are going to play. I don't have a fixed idea of where to go. I like the idea of making the team work.

The team is the Standing Committee for Medicine for the European Medical Research Council (EMRC), under the European Science Foundation. It consists of delegates from the medical research councils and medical communities of EU countries, plus international observers. The committee strives to develop European medical science strategies by advising EU countries on science policy, and by promoting cross-border interactions and collaborations in biomedical research. Liselotte Højgaard has been the chair since 2006, and she is also head of Clinical Physiology and Nuclear Medicine at Rigshospitalet, and a professor of Medicine and Technology at Copenhagen University.

Improving clinical research

Guided by the medical research councils, she and the EMRC recently addressed improving clinical trials in Europe.

- The EMRC standing committee focuses on the entire research landscape, from basic to translational and clinical research, and its implementation, but when we asked our member organizations what the most important issues were, they said clinical trials, so we addressed that first.

In 2009, the committee published "Investigator-Driven Clinical Trials", a strategy document that contains specific recommendations for European countries, on how to broaden the scope and impact of clinical trials.

- We found that much of the clinical research in Europe is run by the pharmaceutical industry and that's good, but we also need clinical studies initiated by academia, and by university hospitals and medical centres, says Liselotte Højgaard.

Clinical studies by academic researchers would not be driven by commercial interests, and could have "a much broader scope and potential impact than industry-driven clinical trials", according to the report.

To encourage academic investigators to conduct clinical trials, the report recommends more training, funding, and opportunities for scientists doing patient-oriented clinical

- We need big countries to say yes to our decisions, and we also need the smaller countries to buy into what we do. It takes longer, but in the end, it gives us resilience, says Dr. Liselotte Højgaard, the European Medical Research Council (EMRC)

Resource website

www.esf.org/nc/research-areas/medical-sciences.html

research. It also calls for a more expeditious authorization process.

- We need to reduce the red tape, and streamline the bureaucracy. We need better education and career opportunities for clinical research and we need to increase funding. We need to teach people to do proper research with power calculations to know how many patients are needed for statistically reliable results.

The report is available online, and has been sent to ministers and research councils throughout the EU, to inform their policy decisions, and to encourage them to work together to solve these issues.

Listening as a management tool

As the chair of a diverse, international committee of researchers and advisors, Liselotte Højgaard has a unique perspective on scientific and administrative interaction. Like a good orchestra conductor, she encourages active listening between parties. This philosophy stems from her experience working with scientists with backgrounds, cultures, and languages from all over the EU.

- I think it's extremely important to acknowledge we are not the United States of Europe. We have different cultures and it's a special thing that we don't all use the same language. We work in English, and those of us who are not native English speakers borrow the language. So I ask the native English speakers to speak clearly and listen and help, and to live with my mistakes and those of the others. I try to make all of us listen more.

She also advocates including everyone in the conversation. For group decisions, take the time to make sure all parties are on board, she advises. In the Standing Committee for Medicine for the EMRC,

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It is not just jobs that are affected

Højgaard applies the principles of inclusiveness and careful listening to her EMRC committee, and to other groups that

communicate over a cultural divide, such as basic and applied scientists, or scientists and government officials. The pharmaceutical industry and European governments must pay attention to what their basic scientists are telling them, and we all need to collaborate, she says.

-The industry will achieve more if they listen to basic research scientists and academia. When they work with the basic researchers, the clinicians and the patients, it might be laborious, but it will pay off in the end.

She emphasizes that communication in biomedical research must be bidirectional, from bench to bedside and back again, and in fact, that's the essence of translational research.

- It's taking basic research results into clinical practice, and vice versa. Clinical research results should inform basic research projects. Finally, Liselotte Højgaard says that countries deciding how to respond to the economic crisis must consider their scientific community, and think long-term.

- Some countries have decided that the remedy to the economic downturn is an extra effort in research, and other countries have reduced their research budget. But when a country downsizes its research, it is not just jobs that are affected, but also those who are involved in research, and the whole atmosphere. You can ruin a lot by just taking a little bit of money away.

In a successful symphony orchestra, all members hear and support each other. EU policy makers should keep this in mind, and take her advice when she says,

- Listen to your scientists.

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