

Financial crisis cripples Spain medical research

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A researcher manipulates a sample at Vall d'Hebron Research Institute in Barcelona on June 20, 2013. The Confederation of Scientific Associations of Spain (COSCE) said in a recent report that public investment in scientific research fell by 45 percent from nine billion to five billion euros between 2009, the year after the crisis started, and 2013.

In blue gloves and goggles, Maria Jesus Vicent's team of young researchers busily mix chemicals in their laboratory, where they work at improving medications for cancer and Alzheimer's disease.

There is a well-equipped lab, but like researchers across Spain, they warn that steep funding cuts made during the financial and economic crisis are threatening to ground their potentially life-saving work—and driving the country's most talented scientists away.

Vicent's team at the Prince Felipe Research Centre (CIPF) in the eastern city of Valencia specialises in [nanomedicine](#), a way of developing compounds that boost the efficacy of vital drugs.

"We were set to be among the best in this field in Spain," she said. "We have made great advances in prostate cancer research. We wanted to go to the next stage with [animal tests](#)," she added.

"But I am waiting to get specific financing for that because I don't have enough money and it's much more expensive than chemical research."

The 52,000 square-metre centre was opened in 2005 at the height of the boom that preceded Spain's economic bust, with 60 million euros (\$78 million) of investment.

But as Spain scrambled to shore up its public finances, the centre's state subsidies were slashed in 2011 from just under 10 million euros (\$13 million) to less than five million, forcing Vicent to rely on European Union funds to continue.

The centre had to close half of its 28 labs and fire 114 of its 244 workers.

"It was tragic to see such talented people having to leave," Vicent said.

Now the centre's hi-tech installations are falling into disuse, with its two mechanised operating theatres for [animal research](#) now being used for training courses instead.



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The Confederation of Scientific Associations of Spain (COSCE) said in a recent report that public investment in scientific research fell by 45 percent from nine billion to five billion euros between 2009, the year after the crisis started, and 2013.

Scientists warn this leaves much hard-won progress in a crucial sector at risk of evaporating.

"It is a mistake that will cost us very dear," said Josep Maria Gatell of IDIBAPS, a leading biomedical research centre in Barcelona, who has spent the past five years developing a vaccine against AIDS.

"In the past 10 or 15 years Spain has made a major effort, which has borne fruit. We had a very good position internationally in research. And with these budget cuts we risk losing gains that took 20 years to achieve. It could take another 20 years for us to catch up again."

Three of Gatell's products are being tested on humans, but their progress has slowed due to a lack of funds.

"If you have more money you can develop three products at the same time. With less, you have to do one at a time. That delays things," he said.

The renowned Vall d'Hebron Research Institute in Barcelona is surviving with three-quarters of its funding coming from international and private investors, according to its director, Joan Comella.

Biomedical research, he said, "generates wealth, jobs and companies. It creates links with big industry, which allow you to develop new drugs."

The lack of subsidies is causing a chronic brain drain as scientists leave Spain to work abroad, he added.

"When a leading scientist decides to leave, he takes with him his team, his knowledge and his capacity to draw funding," Comella warned.

The funding problem extends beyond the medical sphere to all sectors of scientific research, observers said.

According to COSCE the number of public sector scientific researchers in Spain fell from just under 130,000 in 2010 to 117,000 this year.

A Spanish physicist, Diego Martinez, made headlines recently when he was denied a public contract to come back and work in Spain—despite

having won a prize as the best young physicist in Europe.

"In my field there were very few such contracts," said Martinez, 30, speaking from Geneva where he works at the groundbreaking European Organization for Nuclear Research.

"Basically, when you leave, you won't come back."

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