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## Straight talk with... María Blasco

Life hasn't been easy at the Spanish National Cancer Research Centre (CNIO) since the founding director Mariano Barbacid announced his intention to step down in 2009. Two campaigns to find a successor had to be halted—the first for lack of international candidates, and the second because nominees' names were leaked to the press. The leaks occurred amidst a high-profile dispute over Barbacid's controversial plan to use private funds to develop cancer drugs—a move that the country's Ministry of Science and Innovation said contradicted state financing rules for a public foundation.

But things seem to have settled down since CNIO insider María Blasco was unanimously chosen to lead the 13-year-old center. Blasco, best known for her research on the enzymes that maintain telomeres, had directed the center's molecular oncology program since 2003, and had been vice director for basic research at the center since 2005. She became the CNIO's new director on 22 June. **Elie Dolgin** spoke to the new cancer *capitán* about her plans for the agency.

### What do you think the CNIO does well and what needs to change?

The CNIO is producing good science in the field of oncology. In terms of scientific production, the CNIO has been placed within the top ten centers worldwide with respect to high impact publications, so I think that has been a success. What the CNIO needs to do in the future is to try and connect this research with how we understand or prevent or treat cancer.

### How do you plan to bring the CNIO's work closer to patients?

A year and a half ago, the CNIO started a clinical research program at one of the local hospitals in Madrid [called Fuenlabrada University Hospital], and this program has already started doing phase 1 clinical trials. The CNIO has a whole floor of the hospital that has been turned into laboratory space. This has been built and equipped and can hold 100 scientists. I think this will be an important way through which the CNIO can connect to cancer treatment.

### How do you think your leadership style will differ from that of your predecessor?

I really admire the way Dr. Barbacid did things, because he built this center that started from zero and is now on the map of cancer research centers. My intention is to follow his steps in maintaining and increasing the scientific excellence of the center. But I also have strong views on the need for a technology transfer office and on having a communication office, which we probably didn't need when the center was smaller. I think a center that holds 500 scientists needs a strong communication office to make sure that the strategic lines of the center are properly communicated to Spanish society.

### Tell us more about your plans for a technology transfer office.

The CNIO has already spun off three companies, and this happened even without having a technology transfer office. So I think it's clear that CNIO researchers are making discoveries that are susceptible to being transferred into patents, licenses and possibly companies. But it's quite an urgent matter to have a strong technology transfer office so that more of the knowledge that basic researchers are producing at the center can be translated into potential new products or companies.

### How do you plan to fund the drug development program that became the focal point of Barbacid's spat with the government?

The formula that Dr. Barbacid wanted for this program was not possible in the Spanish legal system, but there are other valid alternatives that we are going to explore. I am considering different options. And in order to do that, I am counting on the different program directors and scientific advisory board members of the center. A strong technology transfer office will be also very important to find the best possible solutions to further develop the molecules that have already been developed at the center and show a very good activity against potential cancer targets.

### Why did the search process for the new directorship go so astray, and do you think it has tainted your appointment?

In the first phase, the three vice directors—myself, Erwin Wagner and Miguel Ángel Piris—all agreed that we would not run for the directorship because we had the idea that we could use this change in directorship to try and recruit new talent from outside the center. But we could not get any candidates to come to the CNIO, and this process failed. Then there was a second process started in which the two of the three vice directors [Wagner and Blasco] also ran as candidates, but then some of the candidates' names unfortunately leaked to the press, causing one candidate to withdraw his name, and this process had to be aborted, too. Then there was a third process where the only candidates who were running were internal candidates. This is what happened. I don't feel that this was negative for me, as I had been one of the candidates since the second phase. What I think was unfortunate was that the names of these other candidates were leaked.

### How do you plan to create a stronger training program for doctoral students?

At the moment, we train students, but we don't have any official agreements with any of the universities in Madrid. But we're working on having a formal training program with the Autonomous University of Madrid.

### What's your first order of business?

My first priority now is really that things go back to normality in the center. We have been in the press for reasons that are not scientific, and I think scientists at the center—and I include myself—are really looking forward to focusing on what the CNIO knows how to do best, which is to produce science of the highest quality.