What Is the Status Quo of Breast Cancer Research at Germany's Universities?

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Currently in the throes of a paradigm shift, our health care system is faced with novel challenges and problems resulting from fundamental societal, economic and sociopolitical changes. On the one hand, in highlighting economic aspects, the debate about the health care problems, of course, ultimately impacts research performance. Various studies have exposed glaring deficiencies in research attributable to scarce resources in nearly every field in Germany [1]. Breast cancer research is affected in equal measure [2]. On the other hand, there are heterogeneous factors that have markedly dampened research performance at German medical schools, particularly in our discipline. Certainly, one factor is the motivational deficiencies assigned to the growing concentration of clinical work; the proportion of research fellows working part- or full-time has dropped. Networking between clinical and research institutions only takes place irregularly in German medical academia. Fruitful joint research ventures with non-profit research organizations outside the university sphere are sorrowfully underdeveloped in many places.

Other causes for this lie in the way human resources are recruited and developed. Indeed, the interfaces between students and residents and between specialists and higher-level positions are part of the trouble. Too few students with interest or experience in research enter our field. Residencies lack a structure that nurtures such students. There is a particular paucity of (female) role models and career pathways that might foster an orientation towards research [3]. Scientific accomplishments are hardly a prerequisite for top-level positions at hospitals. Thus, German medical schools are increasingly lacking an inherently research-oriented mid-level staff infrastructure. With certainty, the inadequate remuneration (and equipment) for German W2 professorships can be regarded as a hindrance. Allowances intended for science tend to be consumed by clinical care costs. Without active research groups, we not only lose the 'lighthouse effect' at our own institutions, but outwardly as well. Hence, it becomes very

difficult to develop scientific hypotheses and pursue them at one's own hospital. Nonetheless, gynecology in Germany does still boast a number of prestigious projects on the subject of breast cancer, spotlighting the public's perception of the importance that research in our field holds as a social topic for women's health. German medical schools are making relevant and innovative contributions to the field of breast cancer that stem from clinical, translational, and therapeutic research and have been published in international high-profile journals [4].

Nevertheless, a variety of measures must be implemented in the short and long term in order for Germany's university research accomplishments in breast cancer to keep pace with the international competition [5]. A research committee has been constituted by the German Society of Gynecology and Obstetrics to develop concrete potentials and draft proposals for this in the future [6]. A transparent presentation of the research foci and scientific achievements of the respective departments on special platforms might be one way to give the players in the field a better orientation and to promote networks moving forward early in the planning phase. This presentation should be voluntary and developed according to verifiable criteria. To stave off the deficiency in talented young researchers, special curricula (for example like the fellowships common in America) can be devised that promote more research-oriented residency programs that might include rotations at non-university institutions to support network building. While the motivation for research might be incentivized right from the start, it must additionally be ensured that competent supervision is provided during specialization training. One conceivable model might be to set up specific positions at German medical schools for 'researching senior residents' in gynecology who could mentor productive research among departmental staff. Mentoring programs have already been implemented successfully, but are not comprehensive enough [7].

Notwithstanding the above, it will be indispensable for the future to motivate research group leaders by offering them better equipment and improved (career) perspectives. Therefore, the minimum requirements for enabling the integration of mid-level research group leaders and their research foci at an economically profitable university hospital must be clearly defined and set down for the future. This and other actions present the only way to disseminate research results on breast cancer from German medical schools and keep them at the forefront of the international arena.

References

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