A cancer research charity based in St. Andrews, Scotland, AICR (Association for International Cancer Research) should be familiar to a number of EACR members, who have either been awarded funding, or acted as referees for AICR grants. AICR has an important relationship with EACR, as the co-sponsor of the EACR Travel Fellowships. Each year, these fellowships make it possible for students and early career researchers to attend workshops and courses, or make collaborative visits around the world.

The key role played by AICR in funding cutting edge basic and translational research into cancer, right across the globe, has never been more apparent than during the current eurozone debt crisis.

Last year AICR reported on the impact that the eurozone debt crisis has had on research funding. The eurozone crisis continues and its effects are even being noticed in the AICR offices. The total number of grant applications from Spanish institutions that AICR received in 2012 (73) nearly doubled compared to 2011 (40). Yet the quality of applications continues to reflect the high standard that AICR has always received from Spain. AICR awarded 6 grants in Spain in 2012, bringing the total current projects to 15. Dr Gwen Wathne, AICR’s Science Communications Manager, spoke to some of these scientists, who confirmed that while things have been getting progressively worse, 2012 has been the worst year yet.

There is very little private funding for scientists in Spain so scientists are very reliant on government funding, which has been reduced by 20-30% in the last year. In addition, reductions have been imposed on grants that are already active, for example, salaries have been cut by approximately 20%. Calls for new grants have been delayed, without an indication of when they will be open. Apparently, the next call for applications will mainly aim to fund “excellence groups”, immediately excluding many small and medium sized research teams. Scientists are increasingly being forced to apply for funding outside of Spain, for example EU grants, or from charities like AICR.

Professor Eduard Batlle, from the IRB in Barcelona, confirms: “The Spanish government is in survival mode. They have no definite budget plans for science, it is not a priority. The situation is a bit different at the local government level, especially in Catalonia, where the majority of the research institutes are based. The local government have been very careful; they believe that science is important and are taking measures to preserve it. But in general, scientists are looking to other places, European grants, charities etc. These, especially the European grants, are very competitive. It is tremendously important that scientists have access to funding from AICR. Cancer research is strong in Spain, and I believe that they should get funded, not because they are Spanish but because it is strong science and worth investing in this country.”

Those worst hit by the funding cuts are the young scientists and newly established investigators. Dr Sandra Peiró at the Fundación IMIM, Barcelona tells us: “Currently, in order to receive Spanish funding, one must be a well-established group or be a very promising scientist. Even a best case budget scenario is still not enough to fully develop our research. I have funding from the Spanish government, so I feel fortunate for that. However, this funding is clearly not enough to develop all my research, that’s why being awarded an AICR grant was essential to me and those in my lab. Thanks to AICR we are two more hands in the lab and will have enough funding for three years.”

These thoughts are echoed by Dr Anna Bigas, also based at the Fundación IMIM: “Funding programmes to incorporate new investigators and postdocs are probably the most reduced. This obviously will cause a frightful impact on the groups and the future of science. Fortunately this year I have been awarded two different grants from private foundations (AICR and AECC), which have been very important, and it is enormously helpful for the stability of our group in the near future. In case we cannot obtain a similar government budget for next year, we will have to stop half of our projects and will not be able to appoint new PhD students. This would be one of the worst scenarios for my lab, which has resisted reasonably well until now. However, many other good scientists around me are already suffering this type of situation.”

This paints a worrying picture for the future of Spanish science. Postdocs working abroad, who had intended to return to Spain, are no longer able to do so. Recently established groups are struggling for vital funds that are necessary to generate the results needed to apply for new grants. Many scientists are therefore leaving the country when they are offered positions elsewhere. Finally, eminent foreign scientists who were attracted to Spain will also choose or be forced to leave. This is effectively dismantling the science network in Spain.

Professor Amparo Cano, at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, believes that “the continuing shortages in public funding, experienced in the last three years, are reaching a point where “survival” of scientific research is in jeopardy.”

No doubt similar situations can be found in other European countries, which is why AICR, which funds high quality research anywhere in the world, is providing crucial funding for these scientists, and many others who are in similar positions. Both Professor Batlle and Dr Erwin Wagner at the CNIO, Madrid, state that if it hadn’t been for the AICR grant, they would not have been able to start the research projects that they are working on.

By Dr. Gwen Wathne, AICR Science Communications Manager