



Straight talk with... Leonor Beleza

Portuguese businessman António Champalimaud surprised his family when his will, opened after his 2004 death, revealed that he was bequeathing €500 million (\$690 million), about a quarter of his estate, to establish a foundation for applied biomedical research. He also surprised law professor and one-time Portuguese Health Minister Leonor Beleza, whom he named to lead the foundation. Beleza, who met Champalimaud just once, agreed in principle to run his proposed foundation during a phone call in 2000 but did not hear any further until his death. She has now returned from a global tour of medical research institutions and foundations lasting over a year to determine how best to spend Champalimaud's millions.

On 5 October, the Champalimaud Foundation opened its seaside Center for the Unknown in Lisbon, Portugal. The center will host about 600 researchers and physicians and 300 patients when it reaches full staffing levels. **Lucas Laursen** recently called Beleza to ask how she laid the groundwork and what lies ahead.

Why did Mr. Champalimaud choose you to manage his foundation?

I only met him once, so I do not have really an answer. I guess he chose me because of what was publicly known about me or perhaps because of what he knew from other people, but I do not have a straight answer.

In your role as director of the Champalimaud Foundation, how did you choose the medical areas in which to invest?

Champalimaud did not give instructions related to either the profile of the foundation or the areas we should engage in. He just said in his will that we should support research in medical area, which is rather vague. We chose neuroscience, because we understood that there was a significant gap between what is actually invested and the burden of disease.

We ended up with deciding in favor of cancer mainly because there is there a gap, another kind of gap, between clinical research in Europe and clinical research in the United States. There is a huge gap, and there

are recommendations on the part of the EU to the institutions and the member states to get engaged in doing clinical research in cancer. We are convinced that our figures regarding the results of the treatment of cancer in Portugal are not as good as they would be if more research, more clinical research, was actually carried out.

What did you learn from other biomedical charities?

I learned that they can play an important role when it comes to flexibility: the possibility of running risks, the possibility of choosing what is right at each moment. If we decide to adapt one of our research programs, we have the ability to do this very quickly. Likewise, if we feel that a certain research project may represent a risk in terms of the chances of success, we are able to direct resources toward this area. This is a freedom that many state-run research facilities are not able to exercise in such an easy way.

What is it that your foundation can do that other foundations in Portugal, such as the Gulbenkian Foundation, cannot do?

I wouldn't compare the Champalimaud Foundation to other foundations. The Gulbenkian actually has a scientific institute which is dedicated solely to basic science. The research we chose to do and to fund is not only basic research, but it is also clinical research.

I have read and heard a lot about how difficult it is to actually have researchers and MDs working together. We wanted to build a research place where this kind of connection would be facilitated by the culture and the ambience but also by the physical structure of the place. When a patient enters the building, they can see that there are labs upstairs. And, also, the researchers can see those people entering the building and circulating in the building. You cannot push people to do research they are not interested in or to speak to other people, but you can help in creating an atmosphere in the culture on which these exchanges happen.

What is the most important thing the Champalimaud Foundation can do for Portugal's biomedical establishment?

It's not exactly what we can do for Portugal's medical establishment that really interests us. Science is not a national thing. If you are in a comparatively more isolated place, like from a scientific point of view Portugal is, you have to double your efforts in order to connect your scientists to others. Allowing our scientists to spend time in other research facilities is crucial.

Regarding cancer, we think we can add something, because, if you are engaged in treating cancer and in doing research, you can do treatments much better. That's why we want our MDs to have half of their time for research and half for clinical services.

What is your strategy for attracting researchers from other countries?

The effort in recruiting for cancer research is only starting now, but regarding neuroscience we have been successful in attracting researchers from other countries. We just publish calls in scientific magazines, and our own researchers have personal contacts abroad. What we can offer are a good scientific environment and well-known people who are already in the program, like you can find in any of the very best institutions in the world. The latest group of PhD students which entered the program was half foreigners, half Portuguese. The latest group of principal investigators were all foreigners.

When will you feel you've accomplished the task entrusted to you by Mr. Champalimaud?

I'm not going to feel at any moment that it is totally done. I'm going to be feeling all the time that more and more has to be done, because ambition does not get settled at any specific moment.