

Scientists were shocked earlier this month when the government unexpectedly postponed a call for applications to create a new crop of medical-research clusters just days before the closing date, and said that it would slash the budget earmarked for the project. Government ministers said that they were delaying the project because they wanted to change the way these autonomous clusters are governed. But scientists contacted by Nature say they suspect that behind the decision is an effort by INSERM, France's biomedical-research agency, to exert control over the institutes.

The idea of creating the clusters, known as Instituts Hospitalo-Universitaires (IHUs), was introduced in 2009 to boost translational medical research, bringing together universities, teaching hospitals, research agencies and industry. Based on public-private partnerships, they enjoy much autonomy and are mostly free from government and research-agency bureaucracy. The first six IHUs — in Paris, Bordeaux, Marseilles and Strasbourg — were approved in 2010 and received total funding of €850 million (US\$1 billion). The clusters have been widely hailed as a successful model, and a second call for applications — open to any group of institutions that wanted to apply — was due to close on 12 October. But in a press release on 2 October, the government announced that the deadline for the call would be postponed to an unspecified date. It also said that only two new IHUs would be funded, instead of the three initially planned, and that the total budget would be halved to €100 million. Nineteen applications had been made.

In letters sent to the government last week, and to President Emmanuel Macron on 23 October, 14 applicants said they were "appalled" or "bewildered" by the sudden and drastic changes to the funding and to the terms of the selection process. (Fonte: B. Casassus, Nature|News Sharing 24-10-17)