

Research and Development Forum

NHS R&D Forum response to the Cooksey Review of UK Health Research

The NHS R&D Forum is a peer support and advice network for those who manage research and development in the NHS. It acts as a sounding board on behalf of its members for the Department of Health in the development of policy relating to research, and as a conduit for the dissemination of information. The ultimate aim of the Forum is to improve the environment for research in the NHS. The response below concentrates on the perspective of research management in the NHS. NHS organisations from which our members are drawn will have sent their own responses and may have been consulted as part of the responses from other organisations.

1. We welcome the proposal to create a single budget for health research in the UK. The creation of a single, more strategic funding stream provides for a more coordinated, transparent and flexible use of the existing public funds.
2. The creation of a single fund is in accord with the intentions of the government's strategy *Best Research for Best Health*. It is vital, however, that the detail of the funding system, the timescale for implementation, and the transition arrangements are considered carefully before implementation. In the current climate of change in both the health service and higher education sector, the impact of the implementation of a single fund, in combination with other policy changes affecting finance and research management, must be considered.
3. There are a number of critical success factors for implementing the single fund for health research. The funding must:
 - build on existing excellence of current programmes and learn from weaknesses
 - be supportive of innovation and development
 - encourage greater collaboration across the sectors
 - take a UK-wide approach
4. A careful evaluation of the existing system is needed to identify strengths and weaknesses and learn lessons. Such an evaluation must take a balanced approach which takes account of different methods of evaluation and the difficulties of identifying the impacts of research¹. Any new funding mechanism must be designed to balance the varying and conflicting requirements of different stakeholders. The aim should be to have a system that has an overall beneficial impact.
5. The terms of reference of the review set out the government's health, science and economic objectives. The aim of the new funding system must be to ensure that these objectives are met transparently. The objectives may change over time, or the methods of achieving the objectives may change. Indeed, if they do not change the funding system will have failed to have an impact. The new system must, therefore, also be flexible. The extent of merging of the separate programmes should reflect the financial and management systems needed to achieve this transparency and flexibility. It should not be a PR exercise in response to perceptions by any stakeholders about the relative merits of either programme.
6. The system will also need to be adaptable to the different approaches across the UK – including the differing emphases on social care and public health as part of health

¹ Medical research: assessing the benefits to society. A report by the UK Evaluation Forum supported by the Academy of Medical Sciences, Medical Research Council and Wellcome Trust. May 2006.

research. The awareness of the role of evidence from public health and social care and the implementation of this evidence in achieving health and economic objectives varies across the UK. A funding system that does not take due account of funding of public health and social care research within health research funding will only perpetuate this disparity.

7. The allocation of research funding must aim to create a balanced portfolio. The recent report *UK Health Research Analysis*², published by UKCRC, provides much of the evidence on which to base decisions. Others, such as the James Lind Alliance, have much to contribute on the priorities for research, particularly taking into account the views of patients and the public. The review must consider whether funding for basic research with no foreseeable benefits, but which may ultimately lead to fundamental breakthroughs, should be part of the single fund or whether it should be transferred to other programmes. Overall funding for research must take a balanced approach, the single fund for health research does not need to encompass all possible research that has any link to health, but must be capable of fostering inter-disciplinary research in combination with other funding streams.
8. However, a change in the funding system will not, on its own, achieve the objectives. Collaboration between the sectors involved in research has improved with the creation of the UK Clinical Research Collaboration. In addition to this high level collaboration, more understanding of the needs, priorities and organisation of the different sectors at the grass roots is needed. Those outside the health service who conduct research within the service need to have a good understanding of the impact of conducting research on the organisation(s) in which, or through which, they are working. The health service needs to have a greater awareness of the value of research. Organisations must integrate their research strategy more closely into their wider strategy. Monitoring and inspection systems should take greater account of awareness and integration of research within health organisations. The health service must be seen by all sectors to be not only a resource for research, but a principal partner and customer of research.
9. The health service and the departments of health need to place much greater priority on converting the outcomes of research into policy and practice. The Department of Health in England, in particular, must base policy development on evidence rather than ideology.
10. The health service must take a more business-like approach to research. This requires greater investment in research management, including governance, and financial management of research funds. Funding systems must ensure that the costs to the health service of hosting research are reimbursed efficiently, transparently and in full. This funding must be clearly separated from funding for conducting research. It is not yet clear whether the proposed financial arrangements in England through the NIHR Faculty and Clinical Research Network for England will achieve this.
11. All sectors must take a more professional approach to research to ensure that research is well-designed and managed, and conducted effectively and efficiently.

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² UK Health Research Analysis, UKCRC, May 2006.