



Sir David Cooksey
Cooksey Review Secretariat
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
London
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25 July 2006

Dear Sir David

Single fund for health research

We, Directors of MRC units that make up the Population Health Sciences Research Network, are writing in response to your consultation on the single fund for health research. Our network is funded by the MRC to add value to its existing investments in population health research. We are responding on behalf of the network because the proposal for a single fund raises issues specific to population health, in addition to those which MRC units, severally or as a whole, may address in their responses.

MRC funding for population health research has the following characteristic strengths

- It has a tradition of methodological rigour, and the application of robust methods to both basic and applied research questions
- It supports a wide range of disciplines from molecular and genetic, through clinical and epidemiological, to health services research and the social sciences
- It covers the whole span from basic studies of disease aetiology and the development of statistical methods, through to highly applied research, such as pragmatic randomised trials and evaluations of social interventions such as housing and transport policies.
- It also covers a wide span of research timescales, from evaluation studies carried out rapidly in response to policy changes, such as legislation to ban smoking in public places, to multi-decade cohort studies exploring the accumulation of disease risk over the whole life course
- It has funding mechanisms which facilitate the long term, large scale approach which is fundamental to much population health research
- It has a strong tradition of supporting clinical trials which address strategic questions related to preventive and therapeutic interventions in chronic diseases, as well as those evaluating a wide range of interventions such as surgery or behavioural therapy
- It has an international perspective, which allows the rigorous methods that have evolved in wealthy countries to be applied to the development and testing of interventions to improve health in resource-poor countries
- It is independent of Government priorities, so can address questions that are relevant to future as well as current health policies – for example, MRC scientists were studying socioeconomic inequalities in health a decade before tackling inequalities became the focus of public health policy after 1997
- It is UK-wide, allowing the possibility of evaluating policy differences between the UK countries as 'natural experiments'

DH funding for research has its own strengths, best exemplified by the support for the development of evidence-based medicine, via the NHS Centre for Research and Dissemination at York, the UK Cochrane Centre at Oxford, and the Health Technology Assessment and Service Delivery and Organisation programmes.

However, as population health scientists, we share the concerns of many in other fields of health research that DH funding for NHS infrastructure has not been effectively or efficiently managed, and clinical research has suffered as a consequence. In addition, the burden of research governance has been allowed to increase out of all proportion to the risks involved in participation in many kinds of research. The latter bears particularly heavily on the population health sciences which tend to use large, geographically dispersed samples of human volunteers.

We consider that the following issues must be taken into account as you develop your proposals.

- The basic sciences of population health include epidemiology, statistics, psychology, economics, geography and sociology, as well as biomedicine. All of these sciences contribute theories and methodologies relevant to understanding and improving population health, so all require support from the single fund.
- Population health is not determined solely, or even mainly, by healthcare, so the single fund must include support for research on determinants of health that traditionally belong to other Government departments, such as education, work and pensions, the environment, and others.
- All Government policies that potentially affect health should be subject to rigorous evaluation, in relation to effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, unintended harms, etc. The fund must support those evaluations, and afford researchers sufficient independence to continue to ask difficult questions and promote the use of the best possible methods.

The creation of a single fund is an important opportunity to tackle the problems of research governance, and to build on the UK Clinical Research Network to create an efficient system of support for high quality research and investment in research infrastructure. We hope that the requirements of rigorous, independent population health sciences will be addressed in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of:

Professor Rory Collins, co-Director, MRC Clinical Trial Service Unit and Epidemiological Studies Unit

Professor Cyrus Cooper, Director, MRC Epidemiology Resource Centre

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