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Comment on Cooksey Review on behalf of The Royal Group of Hospitals Trust,
Belfast, UK

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposals for a single health research fund in the UK. The Royal Group of Hospitals Trust welcomes the recognition of the importance of health related research in the UK which is implicit in the consultation document. We also agree with the need to use available funding in a co-ordinated manner to address health priorities to the benefit of patients and the economy. The main issue which we would like to address in this response is the question of whether geographical restrictions should apply to the use of some funding, and in particular the use of HPSS R&D funding in Northern Ireland (NI).

As you will be aware, Northern Ireland is currently unique in the UK in that R&D funding has been withdrawn from HPSS Trusts and used to establish a single R&D fund which is held by the DHSSPS R&D office. R&D funding is used to support research which addresses health needs of the local population and to support local research infrastructure. We believe that this arrangement has greatly benefited health research in Northern Ireland, and facilitated the ability of NI based researchers to compete successfully for national funding sources. It has promoted collaboration between local universities and the health service and has benefited the local economy.

In view of this, we believe that it is important to retain the current arrangements for NI HPSS R&D funding rather than combining this funding in a single UK health research fund. Northern Ireland is a distinct devolved region within the UK, with a separate legal system and government. The health needs and priorities of the Northern Ireland population and research community are likely to differ in some respects from those of the UK as a whole. We are concerned that a single UK health research fund would not respond readily to regional priorities in Northern Ireland and that the considerable benefits which have been reaped as a result of the centrally held NI R&D budget would be lost. Furthermore, we believe that such arguments may also apply to the use of research funding in the other devolved administrations within the UK.

NI based health care researchers currently compete for funding from the MRC etc with other UK researchers, and we welcome the opportunity to compete in the future by applying to the proposed single health research fund. This is not incompatible with our view that the NI DHSSPS R&D fund should be maintained as a separate entity.

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