

Strengthening Public Health Research in the UK

Report of the UK Clinical Research Collaboration
Public Health Research Strategic Planning Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Background

The UK Clinical Research Collaboration (UKCRC) is a partnership of the key stakeholders that shape the health research environment in the UK, namely the main UK health research funding bodies, health departments, academia, the NHS, regulators, industry and patients. The shared aim of the collaboration is to establish the UK as a world leader in health research. The UKCRC Partners are working on a broad agenda of activities to create an environment that facilitates and supports high quality research, including developing a coordinated approach to health research funding.

In recent years there has been growing awareness of the need to strengthen public health research in the UK. In response to this need, the major government and charity funders of public health research in the UK came together in July 2005, under the auspices of the UKCRC, to establish a Public Health Research Strategic Planning Group (SPG), chaired by Professor Ian Diamond. The SPG model, originally developed by the National Cancer Research Institute, has been successfully used for joint strategic planning between research funders. The aim of the UKCRC Public Health Research SPG was to develop a coordinated approach to improving public health research in the UK by implementing actions designed to have maximum benefit for the public health research community, practitioners and the UK population.

Evidence gathering process

The scope of public health research is very broad. To ensure that the actions arising from the SPG would have the greatest impact, the scope of the SPG was initially wide-reaching and became increasingly focused on specific areas that were highlighted during the evidence gathering exercise. In order to identify barriers and opportunities in the public health research environment, the SPG carried out an evidence-based review of the status of public health research in the UK. Input into this process included: mapping public health research related activities of the main UK public health research funders; examining findings and recommendations from recent reviews in the area; consulting key stakeholder organisations in the field and carrying out a further focused consultation with leading experts in areas highlighted in the initial consultation process.

The research mapping exercise showed that the SPG funders supported numerous public health related research activities across a broad range of topics and disciplines and offered a variety of training and career development award schemes to researchers in public health. The consultation process invited key influential stakeholder groups to submit their views on actions that would result in maximum benefit for public health research in the UK. A number of common themes emerged from this consultation and recent major reviews in the area:

- ▶ Workforce, training and career structure – there was a need for increased investment in academic capacity at all career levels

- ▶ Multi-disciplinary and collaborative working – should be encouraged both within the public health research community and between academics, practitioners and policy makers
- ▶ Generating and evaluating research evidence – there was a need for greater understanding of health behaviours, more investment in translational and applied research and more research evaluating interventions and policies
- ▶ Maximising the use of existing data – greater use should be made of existing data including standardisation of capture and improved data linkage
- ▶ Methodological issues – there was a need to develop appropriate methodologies and measures and agree on their usage.

Whilst it was recognised that public health research should be strengthened in general, three specific areas, diet and nutrition; physical activity; and alcohol, tobacco and drugs, were identified as potentially having a large impact on improving public health.

Implementation of joint action

In light of the evidence and in the context of ongoing initiatives, including aspects of health protection activity that were being covered by other routes, the SPG agreed that the most effective framework for immediate joint action would be to:

- ▶ Fund research awards focused on analysis of existing datasets through phase 2 of the National Prevention Research Initiative
- ▶ Establish a number of Public Health Research Centres of Excellence in the UK aimed at boosting infrastructure and academic capacity.

The National Prevention Research Initiative (NPRI) is a consortium of eleven government and charity funders working together to fund research into chronic disease prevention. The scope of the NPRI phase 2 call included analysis of existing datasets, possibly through the creation of novel linkages. The aim of the call was to further realise the benefits of past investment and put existing data to new uses relating to health behaviours, their determinants and barriers

to change. The successful awards were announced in May 2008.

The strategic aim of establishing UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence is to increase infrastructure, build academic capacity and encourage multi-disciplinary working in public health research in the UK. The Centres are designed to bring together leading experts from a range of disciplines working in partnership with practitioners, policy makers and wider stakeholders to tackle public health issues which are likely to have a significant impact on the health of the nation.

A total of £20m has been committed by eight funding partners to support up to five Centres, with each Centre receiving up to £5m over a five year period. The organisations contributing to this initiative are: British Heart Foundation; Cancer Research UK; Department of Health; Economic and Social Research Council; Medical Research Council; Research and Development Office for the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services; Wales Office of Research and Development, Welsh Assembly Government and Wellcome Trust. The competition for Centres, launched in January 2007, was a two-stage process with an outline stage and an invited full proposal stage. Proposals were assessed for their scientific merit by an independent international Scientific Advisory Panel and final funding decisions were made by a Centres Management Board, taking into account scientific excellence and the strategic aims of the initiative. The five successful Centre awards were announced in January 2008. The Centres Management Board will monitor and evaluate the Centres throughout the duration of the initiative.

The two actions arising from the SPG are the outcome of a strategic and coordinated approach by the major funders of public health and are designed to provide an immediate and tangible boost to public health research in the UK. The longer term goal of the SPG is to strengthen the public health research base and build a sustainable public health research community for the future. The SPG funders will continue to monitor the UK public health research environment and respond individually or jointly to ongoing and future challenges, as appropriate.