Opportunities for charities in the new clinical research environment

Medical research charities play a vital role in funding and supporting research in the UK. The new and emerging clinical research environment offers medical research charities a number of important opportunities to strengthen the research base they support. Two key areas of current activity, the development of the UK Clinical Research Network and the work to build up an expert research workforce, provide a platform for charities to use their funding strategically to help maximise the impact of the research they support.

The UK Clinical Research Network

The UK Clinical Research Network consists of a set of performance managed research networks which support the delivery of high quality clinical trials and other well designed studies. The Networks are made up of dedicated and highly trained research staff embedded in the health service. They provide the support and expertise to carry out research studies funded by both commercial and non-commercial organisations, on time and to target.

Charities now have the opportunity to drive forward clinical research in their area of interest and make best use of the support provided by the Networks through:

- Strategic use of **grant funding** to support the delivery of high quality clinical research in specific disease areas
- Funding high quality methodological support to build up the **research infrastructure** needed to underpin successful clinical trials
- Developing a vibrant portfolio of studies by supporting **academic leadership** structures

[Diagram showing the flow of Charities, Grant Funding, Academic Leadership, Research Infrastructure, and their impact on High quality clinical research studies and Patient Benefit]
Grant funding

Charities can develop their research strategies to:

- encourage researchers to engage with and seek advice from the Networks at the grant application stage of proposed studies to ensure access to the best available information and advice
- fund pilot studies to provide the basis for attracting further funding for larger scale clinical trials supported by others
- ring-fence strategic funds to take advantage of opportunities as they arise
- develop joint funding initiatives with other organisations

The UKCRC/AMRC analysis of charity research funding, *From Donation to Innovation*, provides a valuable insight into health research funding by medium and smaller sized charities. The previous *UK Health Research Analysis* mapped out the research portfolios of the largest government and charity research funders. Taken together these two reports give a national picture of research funding that can be used to inform strategic planning both within and between funders.

Research Infrastructure

Successful clinical trials are characterised by high quality methodological input. Clinical Trials Units (CTUs) provide advice and support for the design, conduct and analysis of clinical studies. Charities can help to build expertise and capacity in a specific disease area by supporting this methodological expertise, thereby increasing the quality of clinical research studies in that area. This support could include providing funding for methodological expertise for individual studies through to supporting a specific post to provide methodological advice to all researchers funded by an individual charity.

Academic leadership structures

Developing a vibrant portfolio of studies to make best use of the Network resources depends on having the appropriate academic leadership structures in place. These structures provide a focus for professional advice and can identify gaps in the portfolio of studies in a specific field. Clinical Studies Groups provide this leadership within the Topic-specific Clinical Research Networks and charities are already playing an important role in facilitating in these discussions and providing administrative support.

Comprehensive Clinical Research Networks are being developed across the UK. They provide the platform for medical research charities to play a pivotal role in facilitating and funding the leadership structures needed to develop relevant, high quality studies in areas of health and disease not covered by the Topic-specific Networks.
Building an expert research workforce

The UKCRC Partners are building an expert workforce to support all aspects of clinical research in the health service. This involves developing new training and career structures to help attract and retain research interested clinicians and develop the research leaders of the future.

New funding has been targeted at the specialist training phase of a clinician’s career with the development of opportunities at the Academic Clinical Fellowship and Clinical Lectureship stages of training.

The new integrated academic training pathway from medical school to senior academic level and the specialist training phase illustrated below, present a number of opportunities for charities to build research capacity and expertise in their area of interest.

- **Funding** - The **Academic Clinical Fellowship** and the **Clinical Lectureship** programmes protect a proportion of a clinician’s time for research. This allows the trainee the time to acquire the necessary research skills to compete for an externally funded training fellowship. Charities can provide funding for these external training fellowships, focusing their support on a particular disease area.

- **Mentoring** - Mentoring schemes have been highlighted as an important way to help young researchers with their personal and professional development. This includes building confidence, meeting role models, presenting their work and learning how to compete for grant funding. Charities can play a key role in hosting and supporting mentoring schemes.

- **Influencing** – Charities can help to inspire an interest in research (both in general and in a particular field) early on in a clinician’s training before they reach the specialist training stage. Charities can also help the research community to influence the development of training programmes in particular areas of health and disease.
Further information and contacts:

For more information about the UK Clinical Research Network and the Academic Leadership structures that are being established see the UKCRN website at: www.ukcrn.org.uk or contact the UKCRN Coordinating Centre at: info@ukcrn.org.uk

The UKCRC Health Analysis Reports can be downloaded from the UKCRC website at: http://www.ukcrc.org/publications/reports.aspx and for more information contact the UKCRC at: info@ukcrc.org

Information about the new academic training schemes can be found on the Research Capacity Development Programme website at: http://www.nccrcd.nhs.uk.

Further details of the Academy of Medical Sciences' mentoring scheme supporting the National Clinician Scientist programme is available at: http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/index.php?pid=55

During 2007 the UKCRC and the Association of Medical Research Charities co-hosted two workshops to consider the opportunities and challenges for charities in working with the UK Clinical Research Network and engaging with the new academic training programmes. Summaries of the workshops and copies of the presentations are available on the AMRC website:

UK Clinical Research Network workshop:

Clinical academic training workshop: