A Foundation for the future

How the Medical Research Foundation is looking long-term in its medical research funding

The Medical Research Foundation (the Medical Research Council’s charitable foundation) believes that investing in long-term research projects – research that will not just be valuable now but also beneficial later – is the key to effective medical advancement. The Foundation steps in to fund the most promising health research that will make the biggest difference, filling gaps left by institutions and the government.

Established as part of the Medical Research Council of the UK in 1926, the Medical Research Foundation has been providing funding to advance medical research in areas that receive little or no support for over 90 years. With no connections to a particular disease, condition or institution, the Foundation is free to provide funding in a flexible and pragmatic way where it is needed most and will have the biggest impact.

Research Outreach caught up with Dr Alison Simmons, Senior Research and Policy Manager at the Foundation, to find out more about the charity and its fellows, its current research priorities and response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is the mission of the Medical Research Foundation? Our mission is to advance medical research, improve human health and change people’s lives. We fund research in areas of high unmet need, usually where there is a high burden of disease but there are few treatments available. We are the charity of the Medical Research Council (MRC) and are closely connected with them – it’s important we uphold their high research standards. As we’re seeing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the health and wellbeing of billions of people depends upon continual medical advances. We understand we need to be bold and ambitious – to fund projects that are not just going to be useful now but which may become useful later –, and discovery science is a real priority of ours. Our vision is to support these advances for decades to come – the biggest impact comes from long-term commitment to research.

Government and health charities are spending lots of money developing exciting new treatments and therapies, but there are also areas of medical need that receive little or no support. That’s where the Medical Research Foundation steps in. We fund and support the most promising health research where it is needed most.

Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

I started out in research science as soon as I left university. I’m often asked what my first job was, and I always get a strange look when I reply that I spent a year trying to make a vaccine to stop sheep getting chlamydia … but sheep chlamydia is a serious problem, causing the loss of thousands of unborn lambs every year. That job set me off on my path of academic research in immunology and reproductive biology. After a PhD looking at how immune cells influence uterine cancer, I worked as a postdoctoral researcher looking at a type of immune cell called the ‘natural killer cell’ and how they may influence adverse events in pregnancy, like pre-eclampsia and miscarriage.

After a while I realised working in a lab wasn’t for me; I love taking a wide view of science and research and interacting with people. I left the ‘research bench’ to work for the Wellcome Trust, managing their immunology portfolio and funding scientists globally studying at the cutting edge of immunology and infectious diseases. I moved to the Medical Research Foundation in 2019 where I lead the Research Team and oversee funding in subjects as diverse as hepatitis to eating disorders, autoimmunity and reproductive biology. After a PhD looking at how immune cells influence uterine cancer, I worked as a postdoctoral researcher looking at a type of immune cell called the ‘natural killer cell’ and how they may influence adverse events in pregnancy, like pre-eclampsia and miscarriage.

Our Board of Trustees set our research priorities, in consultation with the MRC and other funder and research societies throughout the UK. Our key aim is to fund in areas of unmet need – where there are gaps in understanding and where research investment can make a real difference. In the next five years we are investing £25 million across child and adolescent mental health, pain and childhood eye diseases, amongst other areas.

We also have specific donor priorities – when people have donated money to research a certain subject. For example, we recently funded a fellow to research autoimmune hepatitis for three years thanks to the generous support of a donor whose wife had sadly passed away from the disease.

To decide on which projects to fund, we have clear criteria – for example, we fund innovations and exciting new treatments that are not going to be useful now but which may become useful later. Our mission is to advance medical research, improve human health and change people’s lives.

thought leader

Dr Tihana Bicanic, winner of the Emerging Leaders Prize, is Principal Investigator for the British RECOVERY trial that examines COVID-19 treatments.

The Foundation makes it a point to support researchers in the early to middle stages of their career.

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How do you decide which projects to fund? Do you have certain research priorities?

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Research Outreach
Hind will develop a strategy for the way in which we want to invest – for example, do we think the most impact will be had by supporting people or projects? We are really interested in supporting researchers who are in the early to middle stages of their career, as that’s when funding can be hardest to come by. We fund to the same standards of peer review and assessment as the MRC – in fact, we often use their committees – and rely on experts to take the final decision.

How do you support research regarding COVID-19, and what are the researchers you fund currently working on?

Many of our funded researchers have had to pause their studies as a result of lab and clinic closures – and some of them have chosen to step away from their research to provide clinical care. We are supporting our researchers and continuing with our planned research activities and events. Antimicrobial Research provides a number of training and network-building activities and events. The National PhD Training Programme in Antimicrobial Research provides a number of training and network-building activities and events. The Foundation funds over 20 students in the UK to tackle the public health challenge of antimicrobial resistance from multiple angles. The National PhD Training Programme in Antimicrobial Resistance provides a number of training and network-building activities and events. The MRC-funded UK Antimicrobial Resistance and Infection (AMR) programme provides a number of training and network-building activities and events.

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How do you regard the current funding landscape – in the UK and on a bigger scale – and what are its challenges and downsides? How will Brexit impact research funding in the UK?

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I would have said the biggest challenge to the UK funding landscape was maintaining a strong scientific workforce – and international researcher collaborations – during and after Brexit. Science is stronger with collaboration and networks. As the pandemic is showing us, the problems that science is tackling are international, and so research should be too.

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