



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From the Lord Bethell
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Innovation (Lords)*

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Name: Catherine McKinnell MP

By email to: petitionscommittee@parliament.uk

7 July 2021

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter dated 5 June 2021, and the opportunity to discuss brain tumour and childhood cancer research with you at the Petitions Committee on Thursday 29th April. We really appreciate all your work highlighting this important area.

Following the discussion, you requested additional information on several points raised, including topics we did not have time to cover.

Basic research

1. Breakthroughs in basic science are much needed in brain tumour research. Basic science research is a key work stream with the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission. The Mission provides a focus for bringing together leading scientists in different fields, such as neuroscience and development biology, with brain tumour scientists. The scientific sparks that we hope will be generated from these brand-new collaborations should lead to exciting new basic science research funding proposals for the UKRI to assess.
2. Government support for basic science research is led by BEIS and UKRI who know best how to stimulate such research in under-served areas.
3. The £40 million announced in 2018 is funding much-needed research within the remit of the NIHR, which is translational, clinical, and applied health and care research.
4. The 2018 workshop to bring neurosciences and brain tumour researchers together, which UKRI-MRC led in partnership with Brain Tumour Research and the British Neuroscience Association, was an important step. Following discussions with DHSC/NIHR, UKRI is planning to hold a UKRI-wide sandpit event with industry to stimulate inter-disciplinary and inter-sector working to ignite whole new ideas for scientific exploration. We are also exploring with UKRI-MRC other ideas with the most promising potential to make an impact in the basic science arena.

International research collaboration

1. As part of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) published on 24 December, the UK has agreed to associate to Horizon Europe which represents a valuable collaboration on science and research to tackle global challenges, and in fields that will benefit the British people.
2. The government is committed to establishing the UK as a science and research global superpower, and this deal fulfils our manifesto commitment to collaborate internationally in this regard.
3. Regarding funding, this Government is making available an additional £250 million in 2021/22 for the costs of association to Horizon Europe.
4. Also, £400 million of the funding announced at Spending Review 20 to support government priorities has been made available to help pay for our association to Horizon Europe. As a result, UK scientists will have access to more public funding than ever before.
5. Participation in Horizon furthers the UK ambition to become a global science superpower: by joining the world's largest collaborative research programme – worth around €95 billion over the next decade – we will be continuing important collaboration on scientific research with EU partners.
6. We want to make the most of association to Horizon Europe and are encouraging UK researchers and companies from all parts of the UK to take advantage of this opportunity.
7. Moreover, the extra funding we have announced takes total Government investment in R&D to £14.9 billion in 2021/22 and follows four years of significant growth in R&D funding, including a boost of more than £1.5 billion in 2020/21. It will mean UK Government R&D spending is now at its highest level in four decades.

Medical research charity funding

1. The UK is home to globally recognised medical research charities, which are an integral part of our world-leading life sciences sector
2. Ministers and Government officials have been closely liaising with the medical research charities to understand the impact of the pandemic, identifying how we can work together, and ensure patients benefit from charity-funded research.
3. Most recently, BEIS and DHSC have announced a £20 million support package, which will support early career researchers funded by medical research charities, helping to protect the pipeline of research superstars who play an essential role in delivering patient-saving research.
4. In the coming weeks, we will continue to liaise with charities on this important issue, but we should recognise that charities have access to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, will pay no business rates for their shops for the 2020 to 2021 tax year and can get a Business Interruption Loan.

5. The Government is committed to continue its support for charity funded clinical trials and investigations through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).
6. As non-commercial studies they are eligible for NIHR support to meet the NHS Support Costs (or equivalent in non-NHS settings) through the NIHR Clinical Research Network (CRN) or NIHR Clinical Research Facilities (CRF); and for the NHS to meet the Treatment Costs (including Excess Treatment Costs) of the study.
7. In 2018/19, more than 1,700 charity-funded studies were supported by the NIHR CRN and nearly 900 charity-funded studies were supported by NIHR CRFs.
8. Government provides significant funding to support charities' research through the Research England's Quality Related (QR) charity support funding, which this year will amount to £204m in England and equivalent support is provided in Scotland through devolved funding arrangements

Childhood brain tumours

1. The NIHR system is a gold standard that is envied by the world and does not necessarily need to be broken and restarted. However, we are looking at ways of ensuring that more and better recommendations for research go into the system in the first place so that, basically, we can spend the money more quickly.
2. The NIHR welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including childhood cancers. As with other Government funders of health research, the NIHR does not allocate funding for specific disease areas. The level of research spend in a particular area, is driven by factors including scientific potential and the number and scale of successful funding applications.
3. The NIHR funds childhood cancer research across its whole remit from early translation and experimental medicine research through clinical and on to applied health and social care research.
4. The following are specific examples of research that the Government is funding into childhood cancers:

- Tessa Jowell BRAIN MATRIX

This is an exciting new trials platform that will give people with brain cancer, including children, access to trials of treatments that are best-suited to their individual tumours.

- Biomed

The NIHR Clinical Research Network supported the recruitment of children with DIPG to the Biological Medicine for Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma Eradication, otherwise known as Biomed. Biomed is an international, multi-centred, and adaptive phase II trial of treatment for DIPG.

- NIHR Great Ormond Street Biomedical Research Centre (BRC)

The Centre is researching the use of imaging to assess the efficacy of induction chemotherapy for high-risk neuroblastoma

- Experimental Cancer Medicine Centre (ECMC)

The early-phase studies supported by ECMC Paediatric Network that the NIHR funds in partnership with Cancer Research UK and Scotland, and the later-phase childhood cancer studies supported by the NIHR Clinical Research Network.

- NIHR Newcastle Biomedical Research Centre

The Centre is studying the genetic profiles of high risk neuroblastomas to provide predictive and prognostic biomarkers for current and future targeted therapies

- NIHR Royal Marsden Biomedical Research Centre

- Developing preclinical models of neuroblastoma and childhood soft tissue sarcoma cells for the development of target-driven drug treatment.
- Early Phase Research into childhood cancers - the Centre is undertaking world-leading research for children with cancer. It developed a 91 gene panel that detects certain genomic mutations in childhood tumours.
- The Royal Marsden BRC is also undertaking fundamental research on diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma (DIPG). This childhood brain tumour is comprised of multiple generations of different types of cancer cells, which makes it so difficult to treat.

- Cancer trials and studies

The NIHR Clinical Research Network has over 800 cancer trials and studies recruiting or in set-up. Through the Network, the proportion of patients entering cancer clinical trials and studies is more than double that in any other country for which data exists, including the United States

- Children and young people in research

The NIHR is committed to the involvement, engagement and participation of children and young people in research, supporting researchers and funders, as well as empowering children and young people to lead their own journey with research.

- Headsmart

Diagnosis of brain tumours can present certain challenges in general practice and as such we very much welcome the work of *HeadSmart* to increase awareness of symptoms that might be brain cancer.

Future commitments

1. We recognise that this is one of the tricky scientific challenges of our age. We have struggled to tackle adult brain tumours for a very long time. There has to be investment in the basic science around them, in the techniques, such as the very focused radiology, and in provable therapeutics that work in the field. This is not going to happen overnight, but I give assurances we are committed to finding a solution.
2. We wish to be clear that the £40m announcement was a signal to the research community that we are serious about funding research in this space. Indeed, we want to spend more than this if we possibly can, on the best quality science, recognising that many of the challenges (basic science, building community) will take time to come through. As part of these efforts, we continue to stand ready to translate findings into new diagnostics, treatments and care for patients via the NIHR.
3. In a House of Lords debate in January 2021, I advised *“Although the £40 million for brain tumour research has not all been allocated yet, it is not going anywhere and we are working as hard as possible to ensure that the right kinds of research project are put forward for that money”*. I also went on to say that *I would like to see it all allocated as soon as possible*.
4. Brain cancer research will continue to be a priority into the future and we fully expect to be involved in this area of research for the long-term, especially given the efforts of UKRI to develop the basic science space so we have more to work with in future.
5. Upon completion of the 5-year period, we fully expect to address many questions on this subject from the brain cancer community, the public, Parliament, and other interested parties. We will be very happy to face all questions and, of course, assume full accountability.

With my very best wishes,



LORD BETHELL