

MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



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Trade Union Side access: In part

Minutes of the Council business meeting held at One Kemble Street on 9 May 2017

Present:

Council	Head Office staff
Mr Donald Brydon (Chairman)	Ms Sam Bartholomew
Sir John Savill (CEO)	Dr Rob Buckle
Dr John Brown	Mr Hugh Dunlop
Professor Doreen Cantrell	Mr Bruce Minty
Professor Chris Day	Dr Declan Mulkeen
Professor Dame Sally Davies	Ms Shar Nebhrajani
Professor Dame Janet Finch	Dr Tony Peatfield
Professor John Iredale	Dr Frances Rawle
Mr Richard Murley	Mr Paul Tait
Baroness Onora O'Neill	Dr Chris Watkins
Dr Pauline Williams	Dr Milly Zimeta
	Dr Mark Palmer (items 1-5A)
Observer	Dr Ian Viney
Dr Helen Bodmer (BEIS)	Mr Mike Stephens (item 7)
	Dr Nathan Richardson (item 8)

Apologies:

Professor Chris Day
Professor Paddy Johnston
Dr Mene Pangalos
Professor Irene Tracey

1. Announcements and apologies

Mr Brydon welcomed members to the meeting and introduced Mr Murley who was attending his first Council meeting. He noted it would be the last meeting for Dame Sally as a Council member and thanked her for the valuable expertise, insight and input she had brought to Council; in particular for assuring good co-operation between the Department for Health/NIHR and the MRC including through OSCHR. Her political insights had also been especially valuable to the MRC.

Mr Brydon reminded members, as announced at the March Council meeting, that Mr Minty would be leaving the MRC in July so this would also be his last Council meeting. Mr

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Minty had played a pivotal role in the success of the university unit programme having taken over as lead of the programme following Dr Wendy Ewart's departure in March 2014. Under his guidance of phase two of the programme, an additional four MRC units (with a further three to transfer shortly) had made a successful transition from intramural status to become university units.

Mr Brydon was joined by Council in offering congratulations to Baroness O'Neill who had been awarded the Holberg Prize. The Holberg Prize had been established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2003 to recognise scholars who had made an outstanding contribution to research in the arts and humanities, social science, law or theology. Mr Brydon informed members that in awarding her the prize, committee chair, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, had described Baroness O'Neill as "a true citizen philosopher".

Finally, Mr Brydon noted that apologies had been received from Professors Day, Johnston and Tracey and Dr Pangalos.

2. Register of declared interests

The Chairman requested that members inform the secretariat of any updates to their declarations of interest.

3. Minutes from the March Council meeting

The minutes of the Council meeting which had been held on 1 March were approved as an accurate record.

4. Matters arising

4A. Report from the Council Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (CARAC)

Dame Janet introduced this item and drew Council's attention to the CARAC annual report for 2016/17 which had been included in the papers. In her view, CARAC was efficiently run and provided sound advice to the MRC and, in particular, the committee had made a significant contribution to the discussions around the performance of UK SBS and cyber risk. CARAC had also been proactive in requesting information and challenging management. Additionally, the internal audit programme was now working well as a result of the internal auditors being better organised and MRC management taking seriously the need to respond in a timely way to audit reports.

Dame Janet updated members on the discussions at the CARAC meeting which had been held on 30 March. The committee had received a report on the results of the MRC Cyber Essentials audit and an update on plans for the MRC to achieve "Cyber Essentials+" accreditation in 2017.

Dame Janet informed Council that Ms Anna Anderson's term on CARAC would come to an end in August and requested an extension of at least a year given the uncertainty around the future of CARAC under UKRI. Council approved an extension to Ms Anderson's term.

Mr Brydon thanked Dame Janet for the update and agreed that the committee had performed very well in recent years under her excellent chairmanship.

4B. Report from the Remuneration Committee

The Remuneration Committee had met on 23 March. There was nothing of note to report to Council.

4C. Minutes from the Strategy Board meeting held on 23 March

Sir John introduced this item and noted that Mr Brydon and Professors Iredale and Tracey had attended the Strategy Board meeting on 23 March.

Strategy Board had received an update on the new call for stratified medicine consortia; there had been a strong response to the call and it was expected that three-to-four new consortia would be funded.

Strategy Board had also discussed the MRC's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) allocation which provided an opportunity for significant expansion of global health activities. In addition, the cross-Council collective fund had been established and was expected to award £200m through the 'Growing Research Capability' call which was nearing completion, and a further £150m through a new call for interdisciplinary research hubs to be announced shortly. Strategy Board had also noted the significant Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocation which had been received by the Department of Health (DH)/NIHR and the considerable opportunities for partnership with the MRC.

Strategy Board had received an update on the Government's industrial strategy and potential opportunities for the MRC. The first tranche of Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF) funding would be largely delivered by Innovate UK and the MRC was working on its case for the next wave of funding allocations.

Strategy Board had considered the draft findings and recommendations of the MRC and NIHR's strategic review of nutrition and human health research. To address the recommendations of the review, the MRC would work with NIHR, other research councils, charities and industry to establish a UK Human Nutrition Research Partnership. The partnership would be tasked with identifying current and future research opportunities and would be chaired by Professor Sir Stephen O'Rahilly (Cambridge). He also highlighted that the MRC's Royal Charter specifically referred to the food industry as an example of one of the industries whose needs Council was expected to meet by advancing knowledge and technology, and providing trained researchers.

Strategy Board had had a final look at the new MRC strategy for mental health research which had been launched on 21 April. It was hoped that the approaches proposed in the strategy would increase the number of high quality applications to the MRC in this area leading to a larger proportion of funding for mental health research.

Lastly, Strategy Board had discussed the plans for the joint MRC, EPSRC and BBSRC Technology Touching Life initiative and approved the funding request for £1.025m from the 2017/18 strategic budget for the MRC's share of joint activities.

Council welcomed the plans for the human nutrition research partnership and the launch of mental health research strategy. Council also noted there may be opportunities for ODA money to be allocated to mental health research as this was an issue that also affected people in lower- and middle-income countries.

5. CEO's report

The Crick

Sir John informed Council that the last Crick occupants had vacated the Mill Hill site in February and work to remove any radiological contamination had been concluded in March. The sale of the property could not take place until the EA confirmed its satisfaction and planning consent was obtained by the developers. Against expectations, planning permission had been refused by the London Borough of Barnet's Council in

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February. The Greater London Authority (GLA) had now 'called in' the application for their approval which would be the quickest means for obtaining consent.

With regards to Crossrail 2 (CR2) a technical analysis of the potential impact on the new building continued. Rail tunnel locations had been amended to about four metres deeper underground which would assist the Crick's situation, and initial feedback from the technical analysis was that interference from CR2 should be manageable for the Crick.

UKRI

Sir John confirmed that Royal Assent to the Higher Education and Research Bill had been granted on 27 April making the Bill an Act of Parliament: the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. The research councils CEOs' UKRI Planning Forum had been renamed the UKRI Shadow Executive Committee and was chaired by Sir Mark Walport. Anne Dixon had been appointed as Director of the UKRI Implementation Programme and Andrew Thompson and David Sweeney had been appointed the Executive Chairs of AHRC and Research England respectively. Recruitment was currently underway for UKRI Board members and the Chief Financial Officer/Deputy CEO.

Dr Bodmer informed Council that transitional arrangements were being considered for the winding-up of the partner organisations that would form UKRI. This included some form of continuation for six-to-nine months following the creation of UKRI to allow for asset transfers and signing-off annual reports and accounts. It was expected that all staff would TUPE transfer to UKRI on 1 April 2018 and work was on-going between the Shadow Executive Committee and BEIS to determine how the future relationships would work.

Members highlighted that scientists needed to be independent of the Government and it would be important to ensure that UKRI remained sufficiently arm's length. Sir John agreed and confirmed that this was well understood. The email address for UKRI would be *.org* rather than *.gov* and a strong independent UKRI Board would help to address these concerns. Members noted that that Sir Mark would attend the July Council meeting and there would be the opportunity to ask him questions then.

New chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (NCoB)

Sir John informed Council that David Archard, Professor of Philosophy at the Queen's University Belfast, had been appointed as the new Chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics for a five-year term. His appointment had been very well received.

Health Data Research UK (HDR UK)

Sir John reported that it had been announced on 23 March that Professor Andrew Morris had been appointed as the Director of HDR UK and Dr Graham Spittle (IBM) would be the first chair of the institute's board. HDR UK would operate as a geographically dispersed institute, comprised of six-to-eight substantive sites across the UK with affiliated partnership sites, but with no central hub. The siting of an administrative headquarters in England was being explored.

Members highlighted that there was still a lack of clarity regarding how the EU General Data Protection Regulation would apply in the UK post-Brexit. Sir John informed Council that *Understanding Patient Data* had been set-up to support discussions with the public, patients and healthcare professionals about uses of health and care data. It was led by Nicola Perrin at the Wellcome Trust and had the backing of the UK Clinical Research Collaboration Board.

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MRC Millennium Medal award 2017

Council endorsed the recommendation from Management Board that the 2017 Millennium Medal be awarded to Professor Janet Darbyshire CBE, former Director of the MRC Clinical Trials Unit, in recognition of her ground-breaking work in trials of TB and HIV therapies and her leadership of clinical trials science over many years.

Annual Researchfish® exercise

Dr Viney reported that the 2017 submission period for the collection of research outputs had ended in March and had gone very well. All seven research councils had achieved greater than 90 per cent compliance from their grant-holders and intramural programmes. Significant improvements had been made to the system and to the process to make it easier for researchers to record their outputs. These improvements had been developed with researchers and research organisations. The MRC and the other research councils had published impact reports based on the information collected in 2016, and the collective research council response to the Government's Industrial Strategy had also been largely based on analysis of Researchfish® data.

Council noted that sanctions were placed on researchers who did not submit returns, and this helped to achieve the high compliance rate. For researchers who did not submit returns, funding of those with active grants was stopped and eligibility for all research council funding was removed for those who did not currently have active grants. These restrictions could be quickly removed once researchers had provided some feedback about the progress of their work. The research councils had been joined by over 30 other funding agencies in the UK and overseas also collecting output data via Researchfish® at the start of 2017. Overall the exercise added another half a million reports of output linked to 80,000 awards.

5A. Brexit analysis

Professor Lomas presented the options for European health care research following Brexit. The two main options were associated status and third country status.

Council considered the paper and the options presented.

6. Finance report

Council noted the finance report, which included the provisional outturn for 2016/17. Members commended Mr Dunlop for an excellent job in meeting the targets for the year; the programme resource budget for 2016/17 was £581.3m and provisional outturn (subject to audit) was £581.2m, a 0.01% variance from budget.

7. Safety, security and resilience annual report

Mr Stephens introduced this item and highlighted a correction to the accident rate which had been included in the paper; there had been two lost time accidents not five.

On a positive note, Mr Stephens highlighted that the MRC Unit in The Gambia had been shortlisted to receive a business continuity award for its approach to the Gambian election crisis. Additionally, following an internal audit, the MRC had received substantial assurance for business continuity.

Council noted that Mr Stephens would be retiring from the MRC at the end of June. Mr Brydon thanked him for all his hard work and the assurance he had given to Council over his twenty years at the MRC.

8. Outcome of the quinquennial review (QQR) of the MRC Laboratory for Molecular Cell Biology (LMCB), UCL

Professor Lomas (UCL) and Mr Murley (Chairman, UCLH NHS Foundation Trust) left the room for the discussion.

Dr Mulkeen reported that the QQR of LMCB had been considered by the Molecular and Cellular Medicine Board (MCMB) in February and Management Board (MB) in March. Management Board had recommended that the unit should close at the end of the next quinquennium following the retirement of the director, and that the science should be continued through grant funding and, potentially, centre funding.

Council endorsed Management Board's recommendation to close unit support for the LMCB beyond 31 March 2022, acknowledging the careful review of the case for continued strategic unit support. Council also endorsed the proposed funding envelope (£22.1m) and transitional arrangements for the final quinquennium.

9A. University unit update

Sir John announced that the legal documents for the transfer of the MRC Prion Unit to UCL had been signed that morning; the transfer was scheduled to take place on 1 June. He commended Mr Minty for the extraordinary effort he had put in to facilitate the transfer.

9B. MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit (CBU) - Gateway Three

Council approved progression through Gateway 3 for the transfer of the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit into the University of Cambridge and delegated approval of the legal documents to Management Board and signing of the documents to Sir John on behalf of the MRC. The anticipated transfer date was 1 July 2017.

10. University units - benefits realisation

Dr Viney introduced this item and reminded Council that the University Units Programme Board had established a specific framework for capturing the benefits realised from the university units programme. An initial report on benefits had been provided to Council in December 2014. This paper was a follow-up to that and included an assessment of overall benefits realised, which Council felt were generally very positive.

MRC university units were expected to deliver across five domains:

1. Building on and enhancing excellent science
2. Opening up new scientific opportunities and funding streams
3. Efficiency gains/cost savings which can then go back into the science
4. Enhanced branding for the MRC and the university
5. Strengthening integration with university research activities

Dr Viney summarised progress in these five areas for the transferred units. He explained that the information had been compiled from feedback from annual meetings with unit directors and from unit staffing/financial data, communication and outreach activities, and research outputs and evaluation reports. The assessment indicated continuing excellent science and research outputs from the transferred units as well as considerable evidence of new external funding streams. Reports from the units demonstrated expansion of scientific partnerships and increasing integration within the universities.

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While the strong association with the MRC remained, MRC branding had diminished in some aspects and the university branding had become more prominent for many units.

Council noted the assessment of the benefits realised from the programme of unit transfers and agreed that one of the clearest endorsements of the success of the university unit programme was the positive way directors themselves viewed the whole process.

There was some discussion regarding lessons learnt and areas for improvement, as the assessment was largely positive.

Council then turned to the analysis of gender balance at university units. It was noted that an increase in PL/PLTs in the university units was accompanied by a decrease in the number of female research leaders supported by MRC core funding in university units. However, as the units became incorporated into their host universities, the new composition of the unit population had become harder to define. Council agreed that the MRC should continue to work, in parallel with the host universities, to encourage gender balance in positions of leadership in the units and the science research community as a whole.

Council discussed the importance of the MRC brand. Members agreed that with the forthcoming transition to UKRI, and the emphasis that had already been placed on retaining research council brands within UKRI, it would be useful for a piece of work to be undertaken to try to assess the value of the MRC "brand".

Council also discussed the funding leveraged by university units. It was noted that new opportunities for funding appeared to have been opened up for university units although it was difficult to confirm fully that this would not have happened if the unit had remained intramural. Dr Mulkeen confirmed that the external grant income far exceeded the proportion of quality-related funding obtained by the university via the REF2014 exercise which was returned to the unit. He explained that the evidence from QQRs of university units over the last couple of years was that the transfer to the university environment had changed the culture of the unit in terms of seeking external funding. Council suggested it would be useful to get ongoing feedback on how culture was changing as part of the annual meetings with directors.

Finally, members highlighted an issue whereby MRC senior fellows believed they were not allowed to apply for external funding. This was likely to be a misinterpretation of the rules, and it was agreed that an email would be sent to Council clarifying the situation.

11. WHITE SPACE – Data on success rates

Dr Viney presented the success rate data which had been requested by Council at the March meeting and was included in the accompanying paper. This covered: success rates for early career researchers; average age of principal investigators when they won their first research grant; success rates for research grants versus programme grants considered at the four main boards; absolute numbers and proportion of applications by gender; and numbers of unfunded applications considered at board scored in the internationally competitive range. He highlighted that one of the most concerning pieces of data showed that a significant proportion of unfunded proposals were actually scored in the fundable range and the proportion had risen in the last year. This was further evidence that the MRC had insufficient resources to fund a lot of excellent science. It was possible that unsuccessful applicants then took their applications elsewhere but this delayed progress and there was a risk that the UK would miss out completely on knowledge (and possible subsequent translation/exploitation) of benefit to the UK.

Sir John agreed that the data provided evidence of the persistent underfunding of the research base. He also noted that the success rate for MRC-supported fellows had

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declined since 2012/13 from 27 per cent to 16 per cent. He suggested it would be useful investigate this further in a qualitative way to gain a better understanding of what had happened. Council agreed that it would also be useful to establish if these researchers were UK or non-UK citizens to build a clearer picture of the situation.

The success rate for all MRC research grants had also declined over the same time period, but the success rate of those MRC-supported early career researchers had fallen below the general population applying for research grants in the last two years.

Council turned to gender imbalance noting that the data showed that success rates for males and females for research grants were similar. However, it also indicated that the proportion of female applicants was lower for research grants (30 per cent) than for fellowships (44 per cent). This suggested that at this later stage in their careers, for whatever reason, women became less likely than men to apply for grants. Baroness O'Neill reported that the Royal Society was looking at ways to address gender balance and considering a new scheme which would enable a person with child care responsibilities to stay in the workforce part-time and not have to change jobs too frequently in order to retain and increase their skills. Dr Mulkeen agreed that more generous mid-career support might help people develop a decent size team of researchers at a time when trying to meet demanding family commitments too.

Council agreed that a more qualitative analysis should be undertaken to get a better understanding of the difficulties faced by early career researchers when seeking their first research grant. Members also suggested it would be helpful to review what other institutions/ organisations with a commitment to gender equality did to provide a supportive environment.

12. Annual update on freedom of information requests

Dr Peatfield introduced this item and updated Council on recent activity relating to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)/Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) and plans for the coming year. He reported that 46 FOIA requests had been handled during calendar year 2016, all within the statutory time limit. There had been no requests submitted under EIR. Most of the requests received had been from members of the public and covered a variety of subjects. Dr Peatfield confirmed that the MRC's perception was that not many of these requests ended up in the press though this had not been reviewed properly. Council noted that Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) had been the most common topic for requests with seven requests seeking information on the MRC's approach to funding CFS/ME research, the work of the UK CFS/ME Research Collaborative, and the PACE clinical trial. As a consequence of the Information Commissioner's decision on the release of (anonymised) individual patient data from the PACE trial, there was still some work to be done around wording on patient consent forms. Baroness O'Neill agreed that this should be discussed at the Ethics, Regulation and Public Involvement Committee (ERPIC) meeting in June.

13. Review of Council objectives for 2016/17 and proposed objectives for 2017/18

Council agreed with the report on delivery of Council objectives for 2016/17 which had been included in the paper. Council also approved the proposed objectives for 2017/18.

14. Draft agenda for July Council

Council noted the draft agenda for the July Council meeting. Sir John highlighted that Sir Mark Walport planned to attend the meeting and requested that in advance of the meeting members send Dr Peatfield any issues they would like raised with Sir Mark to make maximum use of time.

15. Any other business – the Crick Board

Professor Cantrell, the MRC representative on the Crick Board, informed Council that she had sat on the panel for the recent internal scientific reviews of the Crick's immunology community. She reported that the quality standard expected of researchers at the Crick was exceptionally high.

Professor Cantrell also noted that the initial recruitment exercise at the Crick had gone well. Three positions had been offered to one male and two females. Council noted that the positions were not in any specific strategic areas – the Crick had simply selected the best candidates.

Mr Brydon concluded the meeting by thanking Dame Sally and Mr Minty again for their service to the MRC.