

March: Reflections

The question I asked myself on joining the Academy in June 2000 was what should be the distinctive features of a national academy founded on the eve of the 21st century? After some 50 years of indecision, the Academy of Medical Sciences had sprung into being and there was much to prove. On arrival I was surprised to find some Fellows still agonising about the early history – having played no part in the foundation and free from these doubts, I found myself in the perfect place to simply get on with the job of establishing the Academy and putting it to work.

The Academy culture and portfolio of work that evolved was as much due to circumstance (limited resources, the need to build partnerships, emerging issues of the day) as the deliberate pursuit of specific goals. We learnt to be flexible, to play to the strengths of our expert Fellowship, looking to the Fellows for advice and leadership, to stay 'small', and therefore focused.

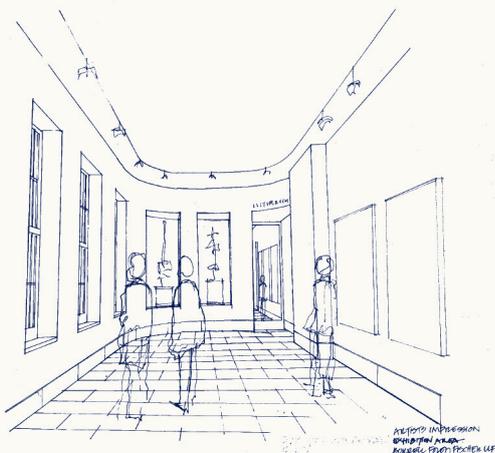
Ultimately a clear set of goals emerged and it is with great pleasure now that I reflect on our success during the Academy's first decade in meeting the mission set out by our Founders.

As I prepare to leave the office, I am hugely conscious of the wonderful support I have received from the Fellowship. I have been privileged to serve three outstanding Presidents, Peter Lachmann, Keith Peters and John Bell, and I have been supported by excellent colleagues in the Academy office. To you all, I say farewell and a heartfelt thank you.

May Manning

41 Portland Place

First and foremost, a sincere thank you to all the Fellows who have generously supported our Capital Campaign through donations and pledges. The support from the Fellowship has been most encouraging. There is still much fundraising to be done, of course, and we would welcome hearing from Fellows who would like to contribute.



Building our future: a headquarters
for the Academy of Medical Sciences

There has been considerable activity at 41 Portland Place during the past few months. In December the hospitality business was closed and security arrangements were set in place. The building is now being cleared out. The Academy has taken steps throughout the process to safeguard the archives and key records of the Ciba/Novartis Foundation and any papers or plans that chart the history of the building and the scientific symposia held there.

A separate exercise is being conducted to determine the future of the Foundation's antiques. Some of the major pieces will be retained to furnish the public rooms of the new Academy headquarters and some items will be sold to raise funds towards the refurbishments.

During January and February, the Project Manager and Architect worked with the Academy to prepare a final scope of works and project brief. We are pleased to report that this is now complete.

The Academy and its advisers are also drawing up the business plan for generating income from the building through conference venue hire and office lets. A market research study has been undertaken with pleasing results, showing improved income potential against our earlier cautious predictions.

Our fundraising target remains at £5 million, which will give us a first class headquarters for the Academy. If you would like to donate, view the building, or to make any other enquiries, please contact joanna.heywood@acmedsci.ac.uk



Translating excellence: ensuring a healthy future for UK life sciences

Biotechnology roundtable & the 2009 FORUM Annual Lecture

In recent weeks, government ministers have described investment in science as both a ladder to climb out of the current economic downturn and as critical to success in the upturn. From a medical science perspective, we start from a good position. Medical science is a strength of the UK; a strong and diverse research base has been supported by increased investment and the formation of bodies such as the UKCRC and OSCHR has enhanced the medical research environment.

The importance of the UK pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries to health and to wealth creation is widely recognised. While our industrial base remains second only to the US, the life sciences face significant challenges in light of the current financial climate. In March, the Academy's FORUM held a roundtable on 'Biotechnology innovation: opportunities & challenges' to discuss the steps needed to stimulate the industry and maintain a leading place on the global stage. The roundtable was followed by the 2009 FORUM Annual Lecture, delivered by Lord Drayson, Minister of State for Science and Innovation.

The roundtable was chaired by Sir John Bell FRS PMedSci and was attended by 30 invited delegates including Lord Sainsbury FRS FMedSci, Sir William Castell FMedSci, Sir David Cooksey FMedSci and Professor Patrick Vallance FMedSci. The predominant view was that an amalgamation of new measures is needed to support the life sciences sector. Potential solutions put forward to address the downward trajectory included: new capital to tackle the lack of funding for emerging biotechnology firms; creating incentives for big pharmaceutical companies to invest in UK biotechnology; a greater role for universities in managing and incubating a portfolio of ideas, and, in the longer term, addressing some of the cultural barriers to cross sector collaborations.

The theme of collaboration - getting industry, venture capital, the research base and government pulling in the same direction - ran throughout the day and was picked up in Lord Drayson's FORUM lecture. Each year, the FORUM Lecture provides an opportunity for FORUM members, Academy Fellows and invited guests to hear from international leaders in biomedical science. Created to promote interaction between biomedical scientists from across industrial and academic sectors, the FORUM operates at the intersect where Lord Drayson has spent much of his working life.

Lord Drayson's lecture highlighted the need to make strategic choices about the overall balance of research funding, to identify where our competitive advantage lies and play to our strengths. He explained how the new Office for Life Sciences, has been set a six-month time frame to implement a strategic plan of action to ensure we fully realise our leadership position in this area.

Lord Drayson emphasised that setting research priorities does not mark a retreat from basic science or from ensuring a diverse science base. Excellence in basic science underpins the UK's international science reputation. Translating this excellence, in areas where the UK has a clear competitive advantage, and where the growth opportunity over the next twenty years is significant, was identified as having an important role to play in driving the UK out of the global economic downturn.

A full transcript of Lord Drayson's lecture is available at: www.dius.gov.uk/news_and_speeches/speeches/lord_drayson/amf_lecture

Funding research in the current financial climate: the research charity perspective

Professor Peter Weissberg FMedSci, Medical Director, British Heart Foundation

The UK is somewhat unique in its heavy reliance on publically funded research charities to support its biomedical research. Over the past 5 years our charities have contributed some £3.25 billion to UK biomedical research and the British Heart Foundation alone funds around 55% of all the UK's cardiovascular research – out stripping the combined spend of the NHS and the Research Councils. Universities are dependent on charities directly to fund their research activity, and indirectly to underpin their returns in the Research Assessment Exercise. The UK's medical academic environment would be very different without them.

Research charities come in various shapes and sizes. The Association of Medical Research Charities has over 100 members, and none is immune from the current global economic downturn. Charities fortunate enough to have a large endowment, like the Wellcome Trust, have seen the value of that endowment fall, whilst those that depend wholly on donations from the public (the majority), have seen a fall in their reserves coupled with a fall in income. All are re-evaluating their funding strategies and some may not survive.

Trustees and executives of research charities have a number of tough decisions to make. Those who also fund a range of non-research activities must consider the relative value of money spent on research and non research activities in achieving their charitable objectives. Consequently, there has never been a more pressing need for researchers to articulate the potential public benefit of their research, no matter how esoteric. Another important consideration will be the terms of their grants. The biggest problem facing charities is managing their cash flow whilst reserves are low and income is uncertain. The easiest way to achieve this is to make only short term awards and to avoid making long term commitments to programme grants and senior research positions – the sort of funding most valued by the academic community. Those who continue to provide such funding will

certainly be undertaking rigorous interim reviews to ensure they are achieving value for money.

At a time when Government is looking for short term economic returns on its investment in science, it is essential that large, independent research charities remain strategic in their outlook and work in partnership with universities to ensure that young promising researchers continue to be nurtured and that world class medical science is adequately resourced. It is a tried and tested formula that has delivered long term benefits. A recent report commissioned by the Academy in partnership with the Wellcome Trust and the MRC estimated an annual return on investment in biomedical science to the UK's GDP of some 20-40%. However, it also acknowledged that it takes some 15-20 years for a scientific discovery to feed through into mainstream clinical practice, so there is no quick fix.

A successful partnership between the charities and academia depends crucially on adequate government support for infrastructure through the Charities Research Support Fund. Research charities will continue to resist paying full economic costs because they do not commission research but respond to requests from the research community for funds to undertake research into some of the most prevalent diseases in the UK, such as cancer and cardiovascular disease, that cannot be funded by any other means.

So is there anything that Fellows can do to support research charities during these difficult times? One obvious answer is to help them raise funds. Too few researchers undertake sponsored activities or volunteer to help the charity that supports them. Another is to respond to the charities' requests for information on research outcomes. Fundraisers need as much material to work with as possible. If you don't articulate the importance of your research, they can't. Fellows can also make an important contribution by participating as Trustees or members of advisory councils whenever the opportunity arises.

Clinical Research Champions

The Clinical Research Champions Scheme was launched in 2007 when the Academy, in partnership with the Medical Research Society, appointed six Clinical Research Champions in Edinburgh, Cardiff, Bristol, Cambridge, Sheffield and London. Their brief was to promote the academic medicine pathway by hosting regional meetings and social events, where trainees and clinical academics could discuss pertinent issues and developments.

Reports have indicated that there is a strong demand for the kind of guidance and support that this innovative scheme provides. Many of the activities that have taken place in the past year have been over-subscribed and the Champions have observed a raised awareness of the academic pathway amongst medical students and junior doctors within their institutions.

The Champions Scheme has given students direct access to Senior Academics who are able to describe the highlights of their career, illustrate how the academic pathways fit together, and ease concerns about flexibility. In some cases this has directly resulted in increased applications to Academic training schemes.

Over the past 2 years, it is clear that the Champions have been fully engaged with local networks and contacts, have responded to local needs, and have maximised the reach of their role. The Academy is pleased to report that two new Champions were appointed in the second year of the scheme: Professor David Adams FMedSci, who is based in the University of Birmingham; and Professor Patrick Johnston, who is based in Queen's University Belfast.

Mentoring and outreach scheme expands to Scotland



The Academy is pleased to announce that due to generous funding from NHS Education Scotland, we are extending our mentoring and outreach schemes in Scotland. We are very grateful to Professor John Connell FMedSci for his efforts in securing this funding and for assisting in further strengthening our links with Scotland.

This is an exciting opportunity for the Academy to help support the careers of aspiring clinical academics across the UK and builds on the existing partnerships in Scotland led by Sir David Carter FMedSci and Sir John Savill FMedSci.

The office team are working with Professor Connell and his colleagues to develop the proposals. As part of the portfolio of activities, we aim to hold an event in Scotland for clinical academic trainees in Autumn 2009.

Academy to offer prestigious internship scheme



The Academy of Medical Sciences and Wellcome Trust have teamed up to offer Trust-funded PhD students the opportunity to undertake a prestigious three-month policy internship at the Academy offices through an extension of their maintenance grant. The scheme is designed to give students first-hand experience of the medical science policy environment, to gain insights into how research can impact on policy, and to build valuable networks with the UK's most eminent scientists.

Four internships will be offered in three-month time blocks to students in their third or fourth year of a Wellcome Trust Four Year PhD and places will be awarded through a competitive application process.

The deadline for applications will be 27 April 2009. Further details of the scheme are available at www.acmedsci.ac.uk/p182.html