

view from the top mark walport

Charities must safeguard their independence as research funders

The charitable sector plays a unique and important role as both a funder and an advocate of research. A recent forum convened by the European Foundation Centre highlighted the growing profile of charitable foundations across Europe. The picture it painted was of an increasing number of foundations, growing levels of expenditure, and increasing social and political influence.

The top 50 European foundations now have assets of about 88 billion euros (£78bn). In the UK, the medical research charities committed close to £1 billion to research in 2008-09. This source of funds is a major contributor to the global strength of UK research and is important for the UK's health system and its economy.

Today's economic situation, with many public and private funders compelled to cut research spending, is bringing the role of charitable funders into sharper focus. Financially constrained funders are seeking new partnerships to maximise scarce resources, while emerging gaps in funding are making it possible for charities to fund a wider range of activities.

While these developments present charities with significant opportunities, they must retain their strengths as independent, innovative and creative institutions. It has often been noted that, as charities become larger and more mainstream, they risk developing a culture that erodes the original philanthropic intent. US engineering magnate Joseph Jacobs wrote in *The Compassionate Conservative* (2000) that, "after the first generation, inherited wealth loses the spirit and values of the people who earned that wealth... the culture of those in charge becomes not too dissimilar from the culture of the government bureaucracies who dispense funds confiscated from the taxpayer." To avoid falling into this trap, research-funding charities must identify and adhere to the core set of values that gives charity funding its unique attributes.

Chief among charities' strengths is independence. This gives freedom to take risks that taxpayer-funded agencies find difficult to justify, including the ability to be highly selective in funding choices and to explore new approaches for funding research. The challenge is to maximise the effectiveness and catalytic value of our funding. Over the last few years the Wellcome Trust has developed new ways to achieve this, including the recently launched Investigator Awards. Importantly we have increased our focus on the indi-

vidual to empower creative researchers at all stages of their careers and give them sufficient resources and time to answer important research questions. The well-established Strategic Awards provide complementary flexible support for large collaborative and multidisciplinary programmes.

We frequently work in partnership with other funders, including governments, other charities and industry—and will continue to do so when we can achieve synergy. As success rates fall for research council grants, charities face increasing requests to substitute for public funding, but their core priority should be advancing their charitable missions. Maintaining the nation's baseline research capacity is, and should remain, for government.

A second core strength of charities is their ability to take a long-term view, unconstrained by government's political and spending cycles, or the need to generate returns to shareholders. This is a primary reason why charities have often played a catalytic role in bringing together funders to support 'big picture' priorities, including major research infrastructure and ambitious scientific challenges such as sequencing the human genome.

The third key attribute of charities that deserves emphasis is their ability to bring a broader perspective to the national debate around science priorities, particularly in light of the current perceived focus on economic impact. Many medical research charities have a strong mandate for their activities as public fund-raisers, and can be powerful representatives and advocates for patients. Earlier and better quality engagement of charities in national science and technology priority-setting discussions will create an opportunity to draw on charities' knowledge and access to patient networks.

The twentieth-century US philanthropist Julius Rosenwald believed that the best option for charities wishing to avoid bureaucratic stasis was to adopt a "radical operation" that exhausted all the funds available within a generation. Otherwise, he stated, "I think it is inevitable as trustees and officers of perpetuities grow old they become more concerned to conserve the funds in their care than to wring from these funds the greatest possible usefulness." The Wellcome Trust is an endowment in perpetuity. Our task is to balance the needs of current and future beneficiaries. We, and the charitable sector as a whole, must continue to maintain our independence as far-sighted and mission-driven funders of research.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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