The UK’s strong contribution to health globally

The first mapping of the UK’s activities in health globally across academia, commerce, government, and the not-for-profit sector is provided in The UK’s Contribution to Health Globally: Benefiting the Country and the World, a new report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health (APPG) published on June 29, 2015. This analysis shows that the UK has enormous strengths in each of these areas, which could enable the UK to make an even greater contribution to improving health globally. There are, however, risks and threats to this position and choices to be made.

The APPG commissioned research from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine to examine the UK’s contribution to health globally and assess the potential for achieving greater benefits. The brief was to map UK activities—rather than assess the more complex idea of impact—and to consider only activities that had improving health as their primary objective. The research was undertaken through interviews, data collection, and literature review with preliminary results discussed with stakeholders; the officers of the APPG and the researchers together agreed the report’s conclusions and recommendations.

The report reveals strengths in each sector. In academia, the UK has three of the top five universities in the world for clinical, preclinical, and health sciences; two of the top five for life sciences; and the second largest share of the top 100 universities for both clinical and life sciences. The UK ranks first or second among G7 countries for research quality by citation impact in health-related fields. The UK has leading funders in the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust; internationally recognised thinktanks in Chatham House and the Overseas Development Institute; and world-leading medical and bioscience journals in The BMJ, The Lancet, and Nature.

Different parts of government and the public sector have major roles in important areas of research, such as antimicrobial resistance, dementia, malaria, neglected tropical diseases, and, most recently, the response to Ebola. The National Health Service (NHS), National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, Public Health England, the Royal Colleges, and other parts of the UK health system are respected for their quality and expertise, have many international links, and provide volunteers to work in low-income and middle-income countries. Additionally, the UK Government’s Department for International Development makes a substantial contribution to health as the second largest development agency, with the UK now spending 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid.

Commercially, the UK Government supports British health-care companies to work internationally and promote life sciences. There are 4800 companies generating more than £55 billion annually, with the largest biotech pipeline in Europe. Meanwhile, the UK has one of the largest and most thriving non-governmental organisation sectors in the world, with
more than 6500 UK charities active in health outside the UK and over 130 charities spending £1·3 billion annually on medical research.6

As the APPG report underlines, a major strength of the UK is its culture of collaborative working. This includes cross-disciplinary working in health research, extensive networks of international collaborations, and partnership working in low-income and middle-income countries. This culture also includes cross-sectoral collaborations with the NHS, academia, and industry working closely together to research and develop health technologies. Where this collaboration works well, for example in genomics research, it is very effective. However, in other areas of research there is a need for greater alignment and linkages between different sectors.

Another weakness highlighted in the APPG report is the geographical focus that is largely limited to the Commonwealth and English speaking countries and does not encompass some of the world’s fastest growing economies. Moreover, the UK’s current immigration policy jeopardises recruitment of academics and scientists from other countries, limits student numbers, and damages partnership working between countries. These weaknesses, together with external competition, threaten the UK’s strong global position in health.

There are, however, enormous opportunities if the UK can address these weaknesses and adapt to a world in which power is shifting and innovation needs to be sourced globally. Health by some measures is the largest economic sector, and exists alongside a unique alignment of public demand for universal health care; public and private investment in health is growing at 5·2% annually and scientific and technological advances are also strong. The UK is well positioned to have an even greater role in improving health globally, particularly by supporting health-system strengthening and contributing to the expansion needed in the education and training of health workers.

The APPG report warns that in the next few years the UK could establish itself more firmly as a leader in health and life sciences or begin to lose that status forever. Our report makes ten recommendations that start with a renewed vision and strategy in which the UK plays a leading part in improving health globally by developing global public goods in health; working with other countries in a spirit of mutual learning and codevelopment; and advocating for the right to health. The report envisages the UK promoting and developing its institutions and industries to create a global health hub and strengthen its influence globally. This progress can only happen with leadership from all sectors.

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