Britain and Israel are world leaders in science. Both have disproportionate numbers of world-class universities, laboratories and scientists and both win disproportionate numbers of Nobel prizes. There is huge potential for our scientists to work together for the benefit of both countries, and of humanity. Yet the level of collaboration does not get anywhere close to the potential.

This is why one of the UK’s goals in Israel in the last few years has been to put scientific collaboration at the heart of our relationship, and start to fulfil this potential.

It was clear from the start that this effort would succeed only on the basis of being driven by the science, not by the politics. To make sure what we did was focused on science, our first step was to launch the UK-Israel Life Sciences Council, which brings together 21 scientists, to direct our efforts and help us focus on the most important areas of scientific collaboration. We are privileged to have as Council members four Nobel prize winners, as well as several distinguished Parliamentarians, including Lord Winston, Baroness Greenfield and Lord Patel. The Council meets annually, and is co-chaired by Professor Raymond Dwek, Professor of Glycobiology at Oxford University, and Professor Rivka Carmi, President of Ben Gurion University.

In its first meeting, the Council decided that we should focus on regenerative medicine, as a field in which both Britain and Israel are world leaders, and where we could do extraordinary things together. This is why we launched the BIRAX Regenerative Medicine Initiative two years ago with the Pears Foundation and the British Council. BIRAX was the Britain Israel Academic and Research Exchange Partnership, and we converted it into a £10m fund to power major research projects in regenerative medicine.

We have raised over half our £10m target, from industry, philanthropy and the research councils of both countries. Following a stringent international peer review process run by the British Council, we selected seven proposals out of the fifty we received, and are now funding them — bringing British and...
Israelis scientists together to find regenerative therapies for some of the world’s most awful diseases.

We have invested £2 million into new research in the following areas:

• creating stem cells that are genetically identical to particular patients;
• managing immune responses and transplant rejection;
• developing regenerative therapies for dreadful chronic diseases such as type 1 Diabetes, Parkinson’s and Multiple Sclerosis; and

...international peer review...

While we have so far funded pure research, we hope that future funding will include translation research, so that BIRAX will also be able to contribute to UK economic growth. Regenerative medicine offers huge economic potential – this is why the Minister for Universities and Science, Rt Hon David Willetts MP, included it as one of the “eight great technologies that will propel the UK to future growth”.

The relationship between our countries is a complicated one. We have real disagreements – for example over settlement building, and the restrictions on Gaza. We are currently doing all we can to support the peace negotiations led by US Secretary of State John Kerry, and have applauded the leadership of both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas in leading their people into the negotiating room.

But fundamentally, Britain sees Israel as a friend, with shared values and wonderful potential for cooperation. The Foreign Secretary has said that Britain sees Israel as a strategic partner. The Prime Minister has said his faith in Israel is unbreakable. The British Government has taken a clear and firm stand against those calling for boycotts of Israel.

Our partnership in science is a model of what UK/Israel relations can be. It brings together brilliant people and institutions on both sides, who can achieve more working together than they can working apart. In doing so, it benefits both our countries, and holds out hope for the whole world.

The next Call for Research Proposals will be announced at the Second BIRAX Regenerative Medicine Initiative Conference at the Technion Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel on 25-26 March 2014.

...three more priority areas...

• working on the vascular environment needed for successful regeneration therapies and viable organ regeneration.

Our regenerative medicine programme is only the start. There is much more to do to develop the scientific partnership. The first thing that the Foreign Secretary did during his recent visit to Israel was to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on Science between the UK and Israel. This document commits us to five more years of the BIRAX programme including new funding for short study-fellowships for early career researchers in both countries. It also outlines three more priority areas where we want to develop the scientific relationship – nano-technology, water and neuroscience.

The future of scientific collaboration between Britain and Israel is an exciting one. We have ambitious plans, and we know where we want to get to – a partnership so strong that in a few years time it will no longer need to be primed by philanthropic funding.

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