

# Strengthening UK Medical Science

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## A new Academy for the 21st Century

Ten years ago the UK health community saw the birth of a new institution: the Academy of Medical Sciences. The creation of a new academy on the eve of the 21st century was a bold move, and not without controversy. The establishment of a national medical institution had been hotly debated for the previous thirty years, and some older organisations were wary of a new body claiming such high aspirations – to play a pivotal role in shaping the national agenda in biomedical science and healthcare. But, ten years on, the Academy has forged a unique and valuable position at the intersection of medical science, healthcare and policymaking.

Our seminal 2003 report '*Strengthening Clinical Research*' represented a turning point for both the Academy and the medical science community. The report catalysed a series of important step-changes in UK health research – from the formation of the UK Clinical Research Collaboration, to the recent £1.3 billion Government investment in the sector through OSCHR (the Office for the Strategic Coordination of Health Research). Our work on the use of patient data in research, training pathways for doctors and medical researchers and human embryos have all had significant impacts on national policy; we expect recent studies on 'Brain science, addiction and drugs' and the 'science of ageing' to do the

same. Similarly, our direct support for clinical researchers and our prestigious mentoring programme continue to attract investment from the Department of Health, Health Foundation and Wellcome Trust amongst others, with overseas organisations now looking to emulate our success.

Issues of medical science and healthcare continue to be at the forefront of national policymaking – how to tackle dementia, addiction and obesity, how to prevent disease and promote healthy living, how to ensure that the UK's excellence in research translates into real health and wealth benefits for citizens. There are huge public expectations around what science and health can, and should, deliver. The need for an Academy of Medical Sciences to provide expert and independent advice has never been greater.

## Our origins and Fellowship

The origins of the Academy lie in a committee chaired by Sir Michael Atiyah OM FRS, past President of the Royal Society. A distinguished mathematician, Sir Michael was well placed to provide an independent overview of the different perspectives and competing aspirations of the bodies represented on his committee: the medical royal colleges, the British Medical Association, Deans of medical schools, leading clinicians and university researchers. The ultimate goal identified by the committee was



to create an institution that could represent the *whole* biomedical community, from 'bench to bedside', and so provide national leadership to a sector that had become increasingly fragmented. In 2008, the Academy's primary objective – to promote advances in medical science and ensure these are converted quickly into health benefits – remains true to this original mission.

Since our inception in 1998 we have established a Fellowship of over 900 leading medical scientists from hospitals and general practice, academia, industry and public service. Fellows are elected on the basis of sustained and outstanding contributions to medical science, including clinical and non-clinical research, veterinary medicine, dentistry, nursing, medical law, health economics, social sciences and bioethics. Our Fellowship is a national resource, outside the framework of Government, with the expertise and authority to deal with policy issues in healthcare in their wide scientific and social context.

## Areas of work

In addition to our work on medical science policy and academic medical careers, the Academy has developed an innovative FORUM with industry, consisting of an active network of scientists from industrial companies and academia. FORUM member organisations are drawn from the pharmaceutical, biotechnology, medical engineering and health product sectors, with representation from commercial companies, trade organisations, research councils and other major research sponsors. Previous FORUM work has tackled safer medicines, pharmaceutical drug discovery, clinical trials and children, and personalised healthcare. Future work will examine the clinical uses of advances in medical imaging, and how the revolution in genetics, particularly the advent of the personalised genome, will impact on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease.

The Academy's 2006-2010 Strategic Plan added a new facet to the Academy's core objectives: to contribute to developments and improvements in global health. This represented an important re-focusing of Academy effort, recognising that our Fellows' expertise should in some way be put to work to alleviate the health burden of the developing world. We have now begun to mobilise the expertise within our Fellowship through activities looking at global mental health research, diagnostics of relevance to low- and middle-income countries and how the socio-economic benefits of research in developing countries can be evaluated. The Academy also participates in a small number of global multilateral initiatives, most significantly the African Science Academies Development Initiative, a scheme supported by the Bill and Melinda

Gates Foundation to strengthen African academies' ability to inform government policymaking and public discourse with independent, evidence-based advice.

## Our future

To have grown so fast and achieved so much in our first ten years is due to the outstanding commitment of the Officers and Fellows of the Academy, the hard working staff, and the support of many good friends, among them the Wellcome Trust, Royal Society, Medical Research Council and British Academy (in whose London headquarters the Academy is currently housed). The Academy is run by a small secretariat of 16 people. The size of the administration and our modest funding have inevitably played a role in shaping the Academy agenda, challenging us to focus on issues where we can really make a difference. But we continue to punch well above our weight and the ambitions of our early years have certainly not diminished. We now stand on the cusp of an exciting new phase in the Academy's lifespan: in our 10th year, we have acquired our own home at 41 Portland Place, London.

The building at 41 Portland Place will be familiar to many as the home of the Novartis (formerly Ciba) Foundation for over 60 years. When funding ran out for the Foundation early this year, the Foundation Trustees proposed a merger with the Academy and transferred their assets to us. This represented a most generous gift of over £4 million. The Foundation will long be remembered as a centre for international co-operation and excellence in biomedical science. Building on this heritage, the Academy's vision is to create an independent, professional headquarters that properly reflects the

prestige and influence of the Academy. The new building will promote our public face and provide a welcoming space to the medical science community from around the UK and the wider world. Our plans to refurbish and develop 41 Portland Place are supported by an ambitious £5 million fundraising programme, to be launched at our 10th birthday celebrations in November.

In the next ten years we will continue to do the things we do well: maintaining a Fellowship that represents the cream of UK medical science; influencing policy on issues of medical science and healthcare; working at the interface between industry and academia; and supporting careers in biomedical sciences through policy, mentoring and direct grants schemes. There are also several areas of activity we are seeking to grow: our work in global health and international affairs, celebrating scientific excellence and innovation, and engaging patients and the public. We look forward to implementing these plans from within our new headquarters, so creating an enduring home that will serve the Academy, the Fellows, and the UK health community, for many years to come.

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### Officers of the Academy:

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