

Wellcome Trust wants research dreams to flourish

Director Jeremy Farrar on new plans to support more young scientists and ambitious projects, large and small.

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With an annual budget of more than £700 million (US\$1.1 billion), the Wellcome Trust is the largest biomedical-research charity in the United Kingdom. Last week, it announced an overhaul in how it funds research. Director Jeremy Farrar talks about the changes, as well as failings in the response to the ongoing Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

You have been leading the Wellcome Trust for about a year now. What have you accomplished?

We spent a lot of time listening to the research community here in the United Kingdom and internationally, and we've [recalibrated our funding framework](#) to reflect the way that I hope research is going to operate over the next decade.

What is changing in the way that the Wellcome Trust funds research?

Let's start with the seed grants. Often you need a small amount of money to dream big and think outside the box, or perhaps move fields — perhaps you've been in mathematics and now you want to move to biology. These smaller grants, which we've lost from the funding landscape, allow people to get some preliminary data, and then go onto larger awards. If you're giving £10 million, sometimes you can be a bit conservative. If it's a £50,000 grant, you can allow dreams to flourish.

There's also an emphasis on young people. We're significantly increasing the number of awards we can make at the early- and mid-career level. And then team research [which will be supported through a new funding scheme for collaborative projects].

Are the new seed grants an acknowledgement that small project grants have an important place in funding, which has been lost?

I think globally we have lost seeding grants, and I worry that we may be overwhelmed with applications because of that. There is lots of talk about programme grants and project grants; this is not about going back to those, because in some ways they didn't always work.

Are these new schemes taking away from your [investigator awards](#), the main source of funding for individual scientists?

It's about rebalancing. That early phase after your PhD is critical. If we don't support people at that stage, we won't pull people through into the brilliant phase of their career. Ultimately, you have to fund more people at that early stage than at that late stage. We just need to rebalance that pyramid and make sure that people see a career in research.

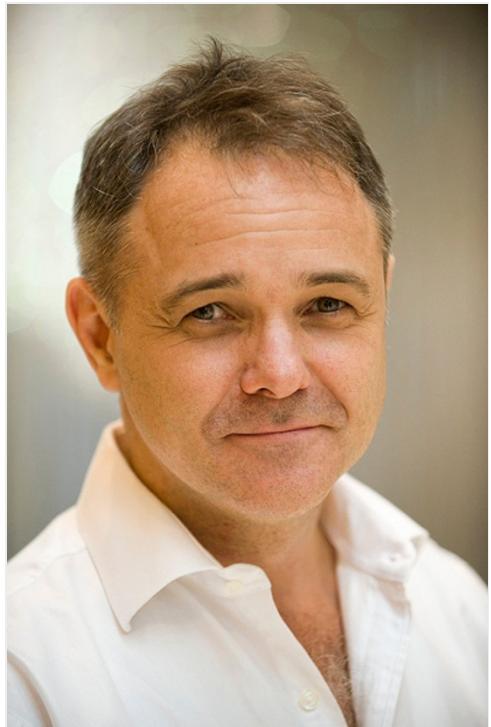
You were one of the first to call for experimental drugs and vaccines to be tested during the ongoing Ebola outbreak.

Are you satisfied with the progress that has been made so far?

I was looking back at something I [wrote in June about our response to the epidemic](#), when the death toll from the outbreak was 200, and all of us — including myself — were too slow. I could have made that June comment in March or April.

Are you confident that this outbreak will lead to effective drugs and vaccines for Ebola?

No. It's extremely difficult to fast-track vaccines. It's extremely difficult to do clinical trials wherever you are in the world, let alone during an epidemic. I wouldn't describe myself as confident; hopeful is a better word. You can only demonstrate the human efficacy of a drug or vaccine for Ebola during an epidemic. The epidemic has to be stopped but it has to be seen as the only opportunity we've got to change this disease for today and the future — and we've been too slow to realize that.



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Jeremy Farrar became director of the Wellcome Trust in April 2013.

