

UK cancer charity slashes research budget

As the value of legacies plummets, Cancer Research UK says it must cut spending.

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One of Britain's largest biomedical funders, Cancer Research UK, will slash research spending because of falling donations, the charity announced on 7 December.

The London-based non-profit organization will cut its annual research budget of roughly £330 million (US\$516 million) by 10% for the next three years, saving around £100 million in total. Officials at Cancer Research UK (CRUK) said that they will reduce the budgets of the five research institutes that the charity funds, and will also eliminate new three-year grants for individual projects in basic biological sciences.

"Clearly it's a difficult situation for us. We don't like to see any decrease in research funding," said Nic Jones, CRUK's chief scientist, at a press briefing.

The charity relies on donations, and one-third of its budget comes from legacies — gifts of cash, financial equities and property made by wealthy donors when they die. The charity spends all the money it takes in each year. The on-going global financial meltdown has caused the value of such assets to plummet, said Ian Foulkes, CRUK's executive director for strategy and research funding, at the briefing. As a result, the charity anticipates a shortfall of approximately £30 million a year for the next three years.

To compensate, it plans to cut research-institute budgets by 5% per year for the next two years, saving £30 million. In addition, it will save another £10 million per year by not awarding any new three-year grants to individual projects in the basic sciences for the next three years. The charity funds approximately 50 grants of this type each year. The rest of the reductions will be made by "top-slicing" other research funding — for example, by reducing the money CRUK administers to translational, clinical and epidemiological research projects.

The cuts are intended to spare the charity's long-term investments — its institutes and extramural research programmes — as well as to preserve funding for training, and translational and clinical research, Jones said at the briefing. Thus, the competitive project grants that CRUK funds in basic biological research drew the short straw. "It was a very difficult decision," Jones said. "There will be work normally funded through project grants that clearly won't be done over the next three years and that's unfortunate."

Constanze Bonifer, a cancer researcher at the University of Birmingham, UK, whose project grant to study the role of growth factors in the cell cycle ended in August 2011, called the cuts "absolutely nuts" when she was informed of them by *Nature*. "That is very, very bad news for people like me who do a lot of basic research on cancer," she says. Although none of the work is "bench-to-bedside", the knowledge that researchers like Bonifer are generating is crucial to translational research, she says.

Gillies McKenna, director of the CRUK-funded Gray Institute for Radiation Oncology and Biology in Oxford, says he expects to see his institute's budget cut by £600,000 over the next two years. He has no plans to lay off staff and instead will look for savings by delaying the purchase of costly new equipment, such as microscopes, and other "non-essential expenses". "We'll try to minimize the effect on any ongoing research programmes," he says.

Richard Treisman, who directs the London Research Institute (LRI), which is funded by the cancer charity, already trimmed his institute's budget — now approximately £40 million per year — at the start of the financial crisis. "We have done quite a bit of top-slicing in the past, so our room for manoeuvre is less," he says. The LRI is set to join the Francis Crick Institute, a joint venture of several UK universities and government and private funders.

Even with a reduced budget of £300 million, CRUK remains one of the world's biggest funders of cancer research. In 2010, the



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Basic research on cancer biology will be hit hardest by cuts to Cancer Research UK's budget.

Wellcome Trust spent £52 million on cancer research, whereas the MRC spent £108 million. The US National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, has an annual budget of approximately \$5 billion, and the non-profit American Cancer Society in Atlanta, Georgia, spends about \$150 million on research each year.

The future of CRUK's budget will depend on the economic climate. "Our hope and expectation is that after the next two to three years, the economic situation will improve and we'll be in good shape to increase our research funding," Jones said. If, instead, the world economy stalls or worsens, further cuts to CRUK's research spending may be necessary, he said. "Nothing will be ruled out."

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