

Advisory Science Council Seeks Step Change In Health Research In Ireland

Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment Micheál Martin and Minister for Health Mary Harney launch report and say health research can improve patient outcomes and develop the knowledge economy.

Ireland must develop and implement a new national health research strategy as a matter of urgency, according to a new report today from the Government's advisory body on science, technology and innovation.

The report, *Towards Better Health: Achieving a Step Change in Health Research in Ireland*, was published today in Dublin at a launch attended by the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment Micheál Martin and the Minister for Health Mary Harney. The Government commissioned the Advisory Council on Science Technology and Innovation to produce the report.

Welcoming the report, the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment Micheál Martin said: "Developing the quality and quantity of health-related research in Ireland is a key element in making Ireland fully realise its objective of becoming a strong, vibrant knowledge economy.

"The Government's commitment to research and development was strongly reflected in the spending estimates for several Government departments announced last week by the Government", he said. "All relevant agencies of my Department - Forfás, Science Foundation Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and the IDA - are working with the health sector to ensure Ireland realises its full potential in health-related research."

The Minister for Health Mary Harney said health research had a major role to play in improving the health outcomes for patients in Ireland. "We have understandably concentrated in recent years on improving the efficiency and capacity of the health services", she said. "It is now time to afford health-related research the priority it deserves. This will not only benefit patients through bringing new insights and possibly treatments to the front line of health service delivery. A vibrant health research sector will also attract practitioners of the highest calibre to work in Ireland."

The chairman of the advisory council Mary Cryan said that a new national health research strategy could significantly improve outcomes for patients and bring new commercial opportunities to the health sector. "Involving the health system in research will ensure it is open to and is applying the latest developments in health care, management and practice for the benefits of patients. A secondary benefit will be to increase the number of highly trained researchers and technicians working in this country, thus enhancing national competitiveness and attracting health care research industries to Ireland.

"Our goal is to make Ireland the destination of choice when advanced technology for health is being conceived, tested or implemented," she said.

Prof Tim O'Brien, Chairman of the task force that produced the report, said its implementation would allow Irish society recoup the benefit of health research carried out in Ireland and internationally. "There is huge potential to improve health outcomes for Irish people through health-related research in this country", he said. "There is also great potential for industry in translating the results of such research into new diagnostics, medical devices and therapies. Our ambition in this report is to suggest how Ireland might realise that potential."

Recommendations:

The report makes 21 recommendations on how policy makers, implementation bodies, universities, hospitals and enterprise can meet the challenges facing the health research sector. These include:

- Funding for health research to be increased to the levels in benchmarked health systems;
- Funding to be allocated on the basis of excellence;
- The immediate appointment of 30 extra clinical scientists with protected time for research;
- Incentives to medical professionals to pursue research careers;
- New centralised structures to drive national policy including an Assistant Secretary in the Department of Health with designated responsibility for health research policy, and an inter-departmental health research group;
- Joint governance of teaching hospitals and universities for research purposes.
- Streamlining and professionalising Ireland's ethics committees; and
- Making Ireland a hub for translational research - bringing research developments "from bench to bedside".

Clinical Trials

The report also recommends the streamlining of the approvals process for clinical trials, which it describes as "fragmented, slow and under-resourced". Ireland is uncompetitive as a location for conducting clinical trials and is losing trials to other countries. "One of the major causes of this is inefficiency in the ethical approval process", the report says.

Each of Ireland's 13 ethics committees has different procedures, membership is voluntary and no formal training is provided to members. The report recommends that four regional ethics committees be established. According to Prof O'Brien: "Approval structures must be both efficient and transparent if Ireland is to develop as a centre of excellence for translational research - research that brings research results into clinical practice, 'from bench to bedside'".

The Task Force that prepared the report engaged in wide consultation with stakeholders. It received over 80 submissions from professional bodies, patients groups, the Health Research Board, universities, clinicians, researchers and others.

Public Investment

"We estimate that about €140 million in taxpayers money will be spent on health related research in Ireland this year ", Mary Cryan said. "This represents one per cent of the total health budget but if the ambitions in this report are to be realised this will have to be increased substantially."

"It is time to get a return on research spending both in terms of improving patient outcomes and capturing for this country the commercial benefits to be derived from cutting edge research", she went on. "Irish research results should be applied in Irish clinical practice for the benefit of patients, and should be exploited where appropriate to the benefit of Irish-based businesses."

She welcomed the recent announcement that a new clinical research centre was to be established at Dublin's St James' Hospital, co-funded by the Wellcome Foundation and the Health Research Board. "This is good news, and more such centres are needed if the ambitions outlined in this report are to be realised," she said.

Speaking at the launch Martin Cronin, CEO Forfás, said "Health research is of great importance from a social and economic perspective and this report sets out a blueprint for optimising Ireland's performance in this area".

Improving Health Delivery

Prof O'Brien said: "Health research is not confined to clinical and medical issues. There is considerable research that could be carried out in Ireland towards improving the health delivery system in areas such as patient records and information technology systems."

Of particular value would be the development of Unique Patient Identifiers - a system whereby every patient's detailed medical history and records are available immediately to health professionals across the health system in electronic form. "A system such as this, with built-in safeguards preventing unauthorised use and protecting confidentiality, would contribute hugely to accurate and rapid diagnoses and treatment."

Integrated Policy

The report says that Ireland needs "an integrated coherent policy on health research. This needs to be developed into a national strategy that has the support and commitment of Government, the educational system, the research bodies, the hospitals, the medical and health professions and other stakeholders. Increasing the performance and exploitation of health research represents a major opportunity to contribute to the development of the knowledge economy in Ireland."

Mary Cryan said such a policy was needed urgently. "The national health research strategy needs to be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency as the window of opportunity is limited. If clinicians are to have protected time for research this must be taken into account in the ongoing negotiations on a new consultants' contract; the need for the intellectual property arising from research to remain the property of the institution where the research took place must also be part of those discussions; decisions are being made now about the future of medical training; and a wave of mobile investment in translational research is underway. Now is the time for action on this."

Up to now responsibility for health research has been diffuse, with universities, hospitals and Government agencies all playing a role. "The Council sees great value in consolidating the policy and strategy function to an Assistant Secretary designated as head of Health Research Policy within the Department of Health and Children to provide leadership in this area", says the report.

It proposes the setting up of a Health Research Group by the Department of Health to co-ordinate the work of various Government departments and agencies and to ensure coherence in relation to health research.

In addition, hospitals and universities should have joint governance structures to ensure clinically-trained academic scientists have clinical time in hospitals and also protected time for research.

The particular health research needs of the Irish population should be addressed by top quality adequately funded research, both through the budget of the Department of Health and Children and under the Government's strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation, 2006 - 2013.

Hospitals have not historically placed enough emphasis on research, and have not integrated it into their core mission. Consequently the opportunities for linking with industry and developing and translating intellectual property into new diagnostics, devices and therapies have not been taken. Hospitals must develop research strategies and integrate them into their mission.