

Cross-Party Group on Life Sciences

Tuesday 14th of November 2023 17:45 – 19:15

Minute

Present

MSPs

Kenneth Gibson MSP
Graham Simpson MSP
Ivan McKee MSP

Invited guests

Professor Frank Gunn-Moore, University of St Andrews
Craig Ritchie, Scottish Brain Sciences
Professor Terry Quinn, University of Glasgow

Non-MSP Group Members

Aidan Reid, Scottish Government
Alastair MacGregor, Chief Executive Officer at SSERC
Alison Culpan, ABPI Scotland
Andrew Howie, Scottish Enterprise
Brian Forbes, Astrazeneca
Claire Headspeath, ABPI (Early access please)
Dame Anna Dominiczak, CSO
David Albany
Deborah McGregor, Scottish Enterprise
Dr Barbara Blaney, Edinburgh University
Esme Pringle, Ettrickburn
Ewan Morrison, Scottish Government
Fiona Nicolson, Burness Paull LLP
Frankie Macpherson, Ettrickburn
George Davidson, GSK
Greg Stevenson, Greg Stevenson Consulting
Heather Rankine, Exact Science
Jacqui Young, Roche
John Macgill, Ettrickburn
Laura Hyndman, University of Edinburgh
Leigh Mair, InnoScot Health
Mark Cook, Chair ILG
Maura Fulton, IQVIA

Michael Barrett, SULSA
Natalie Frankish, Genetic Alliance
Nick Murray, NHSS
Nicolas Peyret, Scottish Enterprise
Philip Jones, Bioascent
Richard Lockhart, Burness Paull LLP
Robert Fleming, St Andrews University
Sir Mike Ferguson, Dundee University

Apologies

Brian Whittle MSP
Michael Marra MSP

Agenda item 1

Opening, Welcome and Introductions

Convener Kenneth Gibson (KG) welcomed everyone to the final meeting of the Cross-Party Group in 2023. He drew attention to the second annual report of the CPG.

Minutes from previous meeting (3rd of October 2023)

George Davidson proposed accepting minutes, which was seconded by Professor Sir Mike Ferguson.

Matters arising

Parliamentary written questions submitted by KG off the back of concerns around information governance and access to data by researchers raised in October's meeting have now been answered.

A team from the Scottish Government's Technology, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Division visited Dundee University last month to meet Sir Mike and tour the facilities, in response to a letter sent to ministers by the convener and deputy convener.

Agenda item 2

The Pipeline: from fundamental sciences to clinical trials, a new faster approach to understand and treat dementia.

Professor Frank Gunn-Moore (University of St Andrews)

Professor Gunn-Moore said already £32bn a year in the UK is spent caring for people with dementia. He said there is a need now more than ever to work across disciplinary and institutional boundaries to make a real difference.

He highlighted three examples of 'good news' stories in the brain health space:

1. A potential doctoral training centre

The success of previous small doctoral training centres has led to the Alzheimer's Society planning to fund three £3m centres, each offering 20 PhDs. Six Scottish universities – St Andrews, Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Strathclyde – have together submitted an application. This unique bid has been supported by a range of Scottish, UK and international organisations, including the Chief Scientist Office, ABPI Scotland, and the Davos Alzheimer's Collaboration. If they are successful, they will be able to benefit from a pooling of resources and shared cost agreements. If not, they have an engaged cohort of people now ready to work together and approach other global funding streams.

2. Scotland Targeting Ageing, Neuroscience and Dementia (STAND) Together

STAND Together is an attempt from five universities to together raise philanthropic funds, eventually supporting spin out companies to become their own 'pooling network. This group will look to tackle bottlenecks in drug discovery and close the gap between academia and industry, by developing a small fund of up to £10m to pump-prime research in a similar way as the Scottish Neurological Research Fund.

3. St Andrew's Group Meeting

Initiated by former First Minister Henry McLeish, Craig Ritchie and Terry Quinn, this forum allows uninhibited discussion of all aspects of brain health to take place between representatives from pharmaceutical companies, Scottish and international companies, funding agencies, and other academics.

Professor Gunn-Moore explained these forums have been very successful and have seen the development of communiques to identify solutions and new initiatives.

Agenda item 3

Professor Craig Ritchie (Scottish Brain Sciences)

Professor Ritchie said he established Scottish Brain Sciences (SBS) in 2022 to occupy what he saw as a missing strand in the triple-helix within brain health. He said the company is dedicated to optimising the treatment of neurodegenerative disease and getting this to patients in Scotland as rapidly as possible.

He highlighted the healthcare readiness of Scotland, as one of just six countries in the world to be part of this strand of the Davos Alzheimer's Collaboration and patients in NHS Dumfries & Galloway being among the first in the UK to access blood-based biomarkers.

Professor Ritchie said he fundamentally believes that dementia will be preventable in five to 10 years and that Scotland can and should lead the way. Key to this, he said, will be early detection.

He explained that barriers to entry means recruitment to clinical trials is not a priority in the NHS: just around 50 of more than 90,000 people living with dementia in Scotland came into a drug trial in 2019 (the year before COVID). He said SBS are hoping to recruit 2,000 in a single trial starting in 2024. To achieve this, he said SBS are asking the public to join a 'community', where they will be empowered to manage their brain health, access free diagnostics and, where eligible, be enrolled into clinical trials. One clinical research facility is already established in Edinburgh, but an additional four across Scotland are 'in the works'.

Within three years, he explained SBS is looking to build the largest database and the largest biobank exclusively for neurodegenerative disease in the world. A laboratory with the equipment to carry out biomarker tests is in place at a site in Guardbridge, Fife, with the company in advanced discussions with several imaging companies to develop a national imaging centre for brain health. He explained these will be important Scottish assets that will support clinical trials and diagnostics and help secure Scotland as the best place in the world to carry out brain health research.

He said the company will always have its base in Scotland, but that SBS is planning to launch in California, USA by this time next year. Already the company has \$68m worth of contracts in the pipeline, and by year 5 are anticipating income revenues of up to \$250m.

Q&A

In answer to a question on the feasibility of dementia being preventable within a decade, Professor Ritchie explained that the Scottish Government is on track to achieve its Programme for Government commitment that everyone in Scotland to have access to a brain health clinic by 2025. The crucial next step will be to ensure the infrastructure and the skillset of practitioners can keep pace. He added that Scotland is currently leading the world in early detection and that there is a huge public appetite for this.

In response to a question on the opportunity to digitise primary care datasets, Professor Ritchie said SBS will be developing support tools for GPs and other providers.

In answer to a question on R&D taking place within Scottish universities, Professor Gunn-Moore said there still exists an unfunded gap between academia and industry that inhibits translation of drug discovery. He said there are ideas waiting to be commercialised, but they come up against red tape each time due to a lack of risk appetite.

In answer to a question about whether the SBS-led model of clinical trials could be replicated in other conditions, Professor Ritchie said Scottish ***Enterprise is*** interested in exploring this. He said this mechanism for delivering trials is crucial due to the difficulties faced in the NHS, highlighting that R&D approval for a drug trial can take 18 months in the NHS while SBS can do it in a matter of days as these processes are all managed internally. He added that the extra capacity created by SBS in trials and imaging can be shared with the NHS and could help clear NHS waiting lists.

Bringing Scotland together and showcasing international connections: The Scottish Dementia Research Consortium and the Brain Health-ARC

Agenda item 3

Professor Terry Quinn (University of Glasgow)

Professor Quinn said Scotland is known for doing dementia well but until recently it had been doing it in a fragmented way.

He spoke about the setting up of the Scottish Dementia Research Consortium in 2013, which offers a community to researchers, healthcare professionals and people living with dementia to celebrate and support all dementia research taking place in Scotland.

The Consortium, which started with 100 members, now has more than 1,000, people including those with lived experience. Key outcomes from the past 12 months include the publication of more than 300 research papers and collaborations with 2,200 international researchers across 49 countries.

He highlighted the importance of breaking down barriers across academia and clinical practice, as well as ensuring its work covers the whole country.

The establishment of the Alliance for Research Challenges (ARC) for Brain Health will, he said, be a key lever to achieve this.

He explained the ARC will support new cross sectoral, multidisciplinary collaborations with a shared vision of improving Scotland's brain health and making Scotland the 'go to' destination for brain health research. Its steering group has pan-Scotland representation from industry, funders, third sector and all universities working in the brain health space. Key to its work will be:

- Supporting people new to research by signposting to training, jobs and grants, providing mentorship, training, and early notification of OLS grants, and offering small grants for seed funding.
- Bringing grants to Scotland; and

- Democratising research data. The Global Alzheimer Platform has given the ARC exclusive access for one year to its Hermes dataset, which it has decided to make accessible to the public. Professor Quinn explained that the ARC will provide support for people with ideas on how to use the data but perhaps lack the data skills, through the provision of both a support data scientist and a forum to increase visibility of any findings. He said this has attracted international interest and is an approach that could be emulated elsewhere.

Q&A

In answer to a question on how the Hermes dataset will be made accessible, Professor Quinn said the ARC will offer an open competition for access and will provide a data scientist resource. He added that the ARC has committed to liaise closely with communities and has a particular focus on remote and rural areas. He said he would welcome ideas on how to reach them most effectively.

In answer to a question on fragmentation and duplication within Scotland's brain health community, Professor Ritchie said that a national brain health directorate, offering a single point of entry, would offer a solution.

In answer to a question on how the ARC will choose research questions to explore, Professor Quinn said they are chosen both strategically, based on where funding is concentrated, and through prioritisation by stakeholders.

In response to how the ARC will translate its research into reality, Professor Quinn said it is crucial academic research doesn't exist in a vacuum and said he is eager to forge new, and strengthen existing, links with industry partners.

Close

Kenneth Gibson concluded the meeting,

The next meeting of the CPG on Life Sciences will take place on Tuesday the 20th of February 2024, and will focus on clinical pathways, health data and providing value of the effectiveness of health technology innovations.