

How to get funding for a research project

Current funding culture and sources

It is not easy to obtain funding to carry out research in child neurodisability, but not impossible. One important principle is to write the application in the way that the funding source and its reviewers expect. To do this, it is often helpful to have sight of a colleague's successful application to that source. And furthermore, all the guidance given by the funding source must be followed, and the application rigorously spell-checked. But the most important aspect is to understand the type of funding culture to which you are applying, or rather to direct your application to the right sort of funder.

It would not be possible to describe all possible sources of funding relevant to child neurodisability. Furthermore, BACD is planning to make available a regular digest of research funding opportunities relevant to members, with the application deadlines, details are available (<http://www.bacdis.org.uk/research/GrantsFellowships.htm>). However, in terms of culture, there are perhaps four main types of research funding. First, and least likely to be of relevance when starting out in research, are the bodies which fund theoretical research (such as Medical Research Council <http://www.mrc.ac.uk/Fundingopportunities/index.htm>, Economic and Social Research Council <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/funding-opportunities/>, Wellcome Trust <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/Funding/index.htm>). Nevertheless, clinicians might be involved in theoretical research led by academics; an example would be ESRC funding under the heading of education and human development to examine how parents create meaning when their child's developmental impairments have no identified genetic diagnosis. The ESRC has had a Small Grants Scheme (up to £100,000) which was useful for new researchers making their first application; this is now changing to a 'Future Leaders Scheme'. More information is available at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/funding-opportunities/standard-schemes.aspx>.

The research spectrum ranges from theoretical research, through exploration of causal and other factors in disease and disability, to development of interventions, establishment of their efficacy and effectiveness, and finally through to 'translational' research. What is 'translation'? It includes, for example, looking at the factors which enhance or hinder the application of research findings in the practice of health and other services. This may be where clinicians wishing to undertake research have an advantage over academics. That is, they are already aware of some of the barriers they encounter in their practice, or ways in which a multidisciplinary approach has improved service efficiency and outcomes for children. So a second important branch of research funding addresses questions of risk management, decision-making and resistance to change. This has become a large focus of National Institute for Health Research funding as long as it is research, not implementation or service development. The emphasis is on translation of research findings into health and economic

benefits, implying that the outcomes of the research should be expected to bring measurable benefits within a small number of years. The Health Foundation, <http://www.health.org.uk/> is also directing its funding toward improving the quality of healthcare. They “want to close the gap between what we know to be the best care and what patients routinely receive”. The emphasis is on partnerships in projects and evaluation studies to test and measure new ways of improving health care. The Nuffield Foundation (<http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/apply-for-funding>) children and families programme directs its funding to ensure that the legal and institutional framework is best adapted to meet the needs of children and families. Current interests include work that links education and child development, in adolescent mental health or younger children.

A third area of research funding might be described as changing relationships within research. One example in the disability field is the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which issues calls for research proposals on particular themes (one of their programmes is on housing and disabled children <http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/housing-and-disabled-children>). The Foundation insists that those whose ‘direct experiences’ are the focus of the research should play a role in developing, monitoring and disseminating for maximum credibility and effectiveness of its programmes of work. They expect researchers to seek to involve those groups who are the subject of the research and have funded studies on how to include those who are usually excluded from the research process. The logic of this approach is exemplified by funding sources which accept only applications from voluntary organisations. Examples are the Big Lottery Fund <http://www2.biglotteryfund.org.uk/evaluationandresearch-uk> and Comic Relief http://www.comicrelief.com/apply_for_a_grant/international. The researcher then works with the voluntary organisation to develop the project, which is likely to focus on development and implementation, rather than strictly scientific research (Comic Relief does not fund ‘medical research or hospitals’).

Finally there are many health-based charities and funding organisations that focus on specific topics. For example, Action Medical Research funds research (and fellowships) aimed at improving the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of disease and disability http://www.action.org.uk/our_research/apply_for_a_project_grant. Autistica (the new name of Autism Speaks in UK) issues periodic calls for medical research that will improve diagnosis, advance new treatments and discover the causes of autism, with some of their funding dedicated to encouraging new researchers in the field <http://www.autistica.org.uk/research/index.php>. This separation into topics can be somewhat frustrating for researchers whose focus is on similarities between areas of child neurodisability, and exploration of outcomes such as quality of life and participation. The Children’s Research Fund is more broadly based, funding research involving children with illness or disability (<http://www.childrensresearchfund.org.uk/>)

Summary

The two main cultural imperatives in research funding can be summed up as Impact and Involvement. First, even when applying to sources described above as funding theoretical research, there is a requirement to state in detail how the outcomes may be utilised by policymakers and practitioners, how services will be improved and the burden of need lessened. Second, researchers are expected to consult at each stage with the people for whom the research matters. And 'consultation' is more than a token visit to a parent group to talk about the research. A collaborative approach to defining the aims, methods, interpretation and dissemination with all the main stakeholders will enrich the research, and potentially make simpler the task of translation into good practice.