



Healthcare experts question plans to ring fence NHS

Industry, NHS and business leaders gathered in Birmingham to support innovation and improve the economics of healthcare.

Ring fencing the NHS budget makes political, not business sense, argues Dr. Alan Davies, Chief Medical Officer of General Electric Healthcare, Europe, Middle East and Africa. Chronic disease will remain one of the largest global risks for the foreseeable future, and reforming and containing costs are increasingly vital.

A way to lower healthcare costs is to be innovative when implementing care pathways. Thus, the NHS could push towards more healthcare delivery nearer the patient's home. Cost reductions of 15% could be achieved while improving access globally and providing better care locally. Connecting to the patient's condition, diagnosing earlier and delivering care remotely are essential for creating a more cost-effective healthcare system.

Forging new partnerships is essential in an era of cost cutting according to Professor Michael Overduin, CEO of Science Capital. The West Midlands is charging ahead, with universities and NHS Trusts in Coventry and Warwick aligning with GE, one of the UK's largest employers, to promote healthcare innovations.

The economics of drug development also need a rethink. The industry has switched to developing targeted therapies, but the high costs involved in the UK are blocking approvals and investments in clinical trials before the true patient benefits are clear, according to Philip Johnson, Professor of Oncology at the University of Birmingham.

The fair allocation of limited research funds should be based both on predicted treatment benefits and on optimizing delivery to meet patient demands according to Professor Richard Lilford, Director of Birmingham Clinical Research Academy.

A significant challenge for the pharmaceutical industry will be to make an economic return from the discovery and development of new anticancer drugs targeted at smaller patient populations whose cancers are driven by particular combinations of gene mutations.

The current regulatory hurdles may have to be lowered to ensure that profits can be made from such drugs whilst still satisfying the cost/benefit requirements of bodies such as NICE. This new emphasis on personalised medicine and patient-focussed therapies could open up opportunities for agile biotech companies that partner well, control costs and remain investment ready, according to John Slack of PharMomentum.

Our region offers a vibrant network of over 440 medical and biotechnology companies, according to MedilinkWM, the lead sponsor of the meeting entitled "Drugs, Diagnostics and Delivery: from Personalised Medicine to Global Health". There are more companies in the pipeline, with local teams presenting business plans to a cracking team of legal, financial and management experts and investors from Midven and Beer & Partners.

Hundreds of researchers from across the region are now developing new tools for earlier detection of disease and improving therapies for cancer and lung diseases. The technologies will provide better intelligence on whether diseases are forming or treatments are working, creating avenues to curtail costs, justify clinical trials and launch companies.

According to Andrew Muir, Director of Midven “the event was a great reminder that attractive investment opportunities with the potential to change people's lives for the better can arise from publicly funded basic research, and that ideas need the right environment in which to take shape and access human and financial capital”.

In discussions moderated by Tony Davis, CEO of MedilinkWM, the tremendous opportunities within the West Midlands for drug development and medical diagnostics became evident. The Science Capital event was focussed on linking those in the region developing or supporting technologies for the industry, and new approaches for optimizing healthcare.

We have a world class infrastructure in Birmingham, including the Leukaemia Centre, according to Professor Charles Craddock. Since being founded in Birmingham in 2004 the Centre has attracted nearly £12 million of pro bono drugs donated by pharmaceutical companies for clinical trials, created nearly a hundred new jobs, and is an exemplar of patient-focused care that is being rolled out across the nation.

Science Capital was established in Birmingham to support commercialisation of new healthcare, low carbon and information technologies being developed in the region. The events bring together scientists, business experts, policy makers and financial advisors looking to build new partnerships.

Science Capital’s first Innovative Healthcare Meeting was held at the Birmingham Conservatoire on Wednesday 15th September 2010, and is planned to be an annual event offered in partnership with Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Science City and the Lunar Society.

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Background on Science Capital:

Science Capital is an independent and inclusive organisation directed by Professor Michael Overduin (University of Birmingham), Brian Miller (FD Solutions) and Vernon Blackmore (Netnak). It was developed as a sister organisation of the Lunar Society, and was established as a company limited by guarantee in March 2010. The company is based at 8th Floor, 134 Edmund Street, Birmingham, B3 2ES, and brings together scientists, business experts, corporate finance agents and investors together to move the region’s economy forward (see www.sciencecapital.co.uk and www.sciencecapital.org).

Brief description of the event:

The event, “Drugs, Diagnostics and Delivery: from Personalised Medicine to Global Health”, took place on 15 Sept 2010. Leading experts at universities, companies and NHS Trusts based in the West

Midlands discussed new ways to detect, prevent and treat cancer, lung and pregnancy disorders.

Talks included:

“Cancer Treatment, Diagnosis and Clinical Trials” by Professor Philip Johnson, Director of the Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit, University of Birmingham, which runs up to forty trials at any one time, encompassing all stages of drug development from ‘first use’ studies to large randomized trials involving up to ten thousand patients.

“Meeting clinical needs through innovative technologies” by Professor Monica Spiteri, Director of Lung Research at the University Hospital of North Staffordshire and Keele University, who is developing near patient technologies for Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease with support from the National Institute of Health Research & NHS West Midlands Innovations.

“The Brain Tumour Research Centre” by Professor John Darling, Dean of the School of Applied Sciences and Director of the Research Institute in Healthcare Science, University of Wolverhampton, who is focussing on the development and testing of novel therapeutics for malignant brain tumours.

“Biomarkers: from research and development through to clinical studies” by Dr Subhasis Banarjee, Director of Origin Biomarkers and based at Heartlands Hospital, who won support from Advantage West Midlands to commercialise new immunodiagnostic assays for pregnancy disorders.

“Future Directions in Healthcare” by Dr Alan Davies, Chief Medical Officer at GE Healthcare, presenting on the convergence of biology, imaging and information technologies in healthcare, revealing how the treatment of cancer, stroke and rheumatoid arthritis is being transformed.

What the aim of the event is:

This Innovative Healthcare Meeting brings together scientists and business experts active in medical diagnostics, drug discovery and healthcare policy. Through engaging talks and lively discussions, Science Capital explores scientific and technological advances alongside the investment and legal frameworks needed to make them a commercial reality.

What is special/different about the event:

Engaging seminars are offered by leading researchers from across the West Midlands who present their latest ideas and technologies, and thereby gain exposure to the region’s business leaders. As an accessible membership organization, Science Capital is open to all those who are interested in developing an innovation-led economy and in commercializing research discoveries.

Who it is targeted at:

The speakers are drawn from across the region’s array of universities, NHS trusts and research intensive companies. A panel discussion will engage the audience’s questions and discuss strategies. Scientists, investors, policy makers and business experts will be provided with opportunities to build the relationships needed to grow successful companies.

What's in the future for Science Capital:

The next Science Capital event will be held at Hotel du Vin Birmingham on 13 October 2010 and will focus on digital media technologies and virtual worlds; the Innovative Healthcare Meeting is intended to be an annual event, further details and tickets are available at www.sciencecapital.co.uk.