

ROYAL FREE CHARITY

Research strategy 2024-2028



FURTHER, FASTER, FOR ALL.

Foreword

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Research is a fundamental route to achieving change. Alongside the vital services, grants and support we provide for patients and staff which change lives today, we fund research to improve outcomes and quality of life tomorrow.



We're uniquely placed as the strategic charity partner of the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust to help the trust become a world-leading research-active organisation driving forward the boundaries of medical science. In close partnership with the Royal Free London and its academic research partner, UCL, we can do things together which the NHS can't do on its own. Our PhD programme has propelled the careers of scientists who have gone on to have national and global impact. Our delivery of the multi-award-winning £60m Pears Building, home of the UCL Institute of Immunity and Transplantation (IIT), has created Europe's biggest centre for immune research. And our investment in the new National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Royal Free Clinical Research Facility (CRF) at the Royal Free Hospital has built a pathway from the lab to the heart of the hospital, speeding up clinical research and providing rapid feedback to the researchers on our campus.

As we approach the bicentenary of the founding of the Royal Free Hospital, the charity's ambitious research strategy not only aims to make a significant difference to the patients of north central London and beyond who seek treatment at the trust but also to our understanding of rare and common conditions to achieve national and potentially global impact.

Jon Spiers, Chief Executive, Royal Free Charity

Clinical research is a vital area of our work at the Royal Free London bringing better outcomes, early access to new interventions, increased sustainability, and enhanced staff experience. The partnership between the Royal Free London and the Royal Free Charity is a critical component in advancing our five-year clinical research and development (R&D) strategy to increase research opportunities for our local and specialist populations and our staff. Royal Free Charity funding for research has allowed the development of the NIHR Royal Free CRF and the acceleration of numerous research projects. We are delighted that the Royal Free Charity research strategy will include new initiatives to enhance research capability and to align research funding with our clinical R&D strategy.

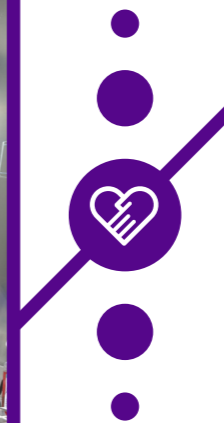
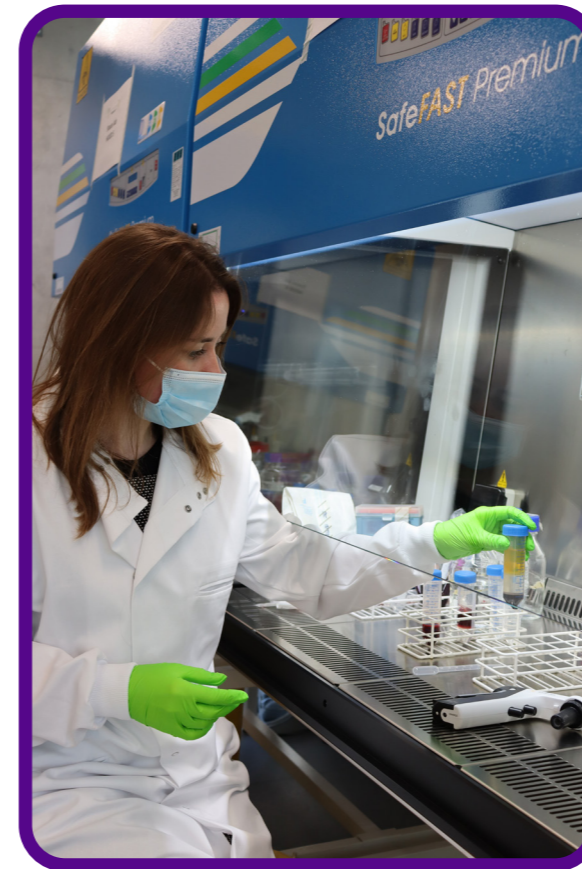


*Professor Derralynn Hughes, Clinical Director of Research and Innovation
Royal Free London*

Vision

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Our vision is for everyone served by the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust to have access to world-leading healthcare, delivered by a thriving workforce and driven by medical research that has a global impact. We support the 10,000 staff of the Royal Free London and their 1.6 million patients across Barnet, Chase Farm and Royal Free hospitals and more than 30 NHS services.



Mission

The Royal Free Charity supports our hospitals, our NHS colleagues, our patients and our researchers.

From small acts of kindness to huge investments in discovery and innovation, everything we do changes lives for the better.

Our extraordinary volunteers enrich the experience of patients and the support they provide to NHS staff is transformational.

We're there when patients need us, thanks to the services we provide. And the grants that we make help our hospitals to accelerate vital medical research and invest in innovations to help patients and staff.

All this is made possible by the generosity of our supporters who help our hospitals go further and faster than the NHS could do alone.

Our work with the Royal Free London

Working together with the trust, we can achieve more than working in isolation. We target investments in areas of innovation and deliver services as part of the hospital team.

Through the services we provide, and the programmes and equipment we fund, we make a profound and immediate difference to patients' experiences of care. Our volunteering, support hub, and complementary therapy teams enhance the hospital journey for all patients – whether they live locally or come from further afield to access the trust's specialist services.

Our support of the Royal Free London workforce enables staff to perform at their very best. Spanning individual professional development and training through to organisation-wide interventions, our initiatives bolster employee resilience and mental health so staff can achieve the best outcomes for patients.



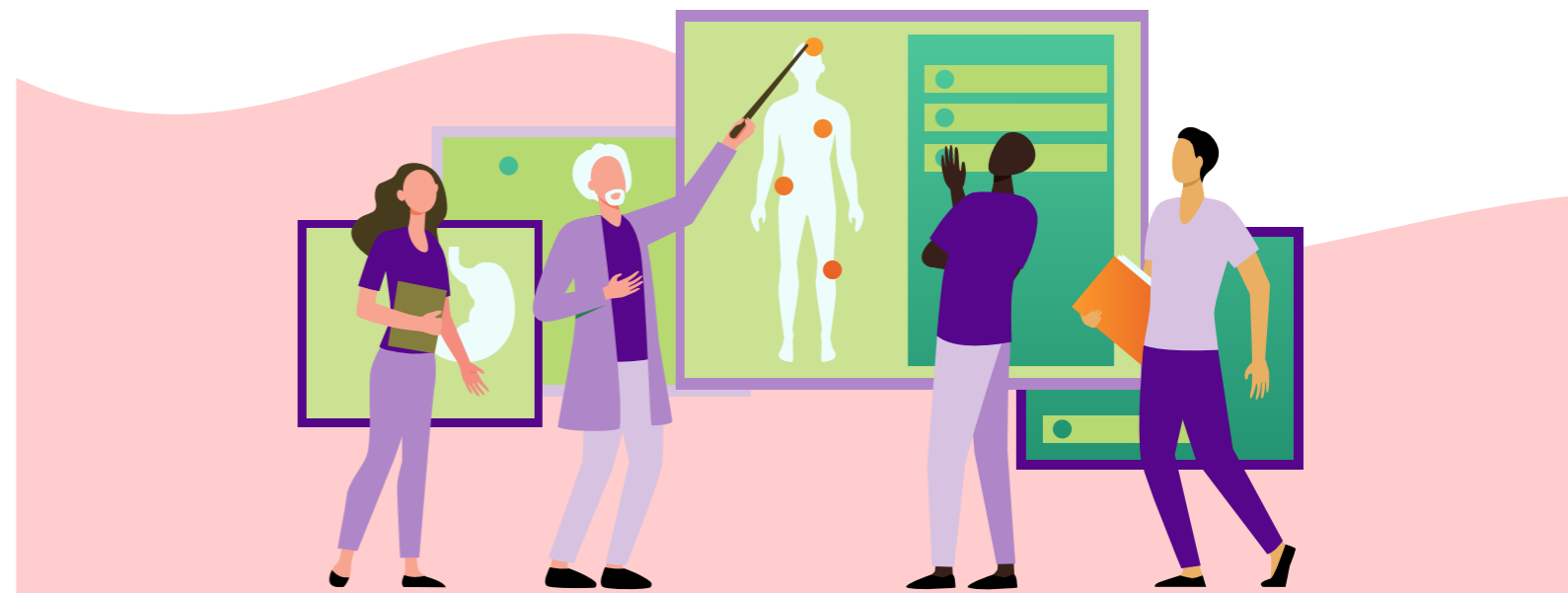
Our impact

The Royal Free Charity's strategic partnership with the trust means we can provide funding for pioneering research and support research at the trust which other funding bodies may not support. This approach has enabled our funding to demonstrate tangible impact on the research landscape and to patients' lives. Over the last five years, we have provided over £10m in research funding to the trust and its academic partner, UCL.

Our approach to research funding ensures that we support a wide range of research from lab-based discovery research aiming to understand disease mechanisms to infrastructure support such as the Pears Building and the NIHR Royal Free CRF. The UCL Institute of Immunity and Transplantation (IIT) hosted at the Pears Building is one of a handful of research centres in the world dedicated to the human immune system and the largest such centre in Europe. The IIT conducts world-leading translational research which takes those lab-based discoveries and turns them into better treatments. The outcomes from the research at the IIT can then be tested in patients at the neighbouring CRF.

The location of the IIT and CRF on the Royal Free Hospital campus ensures research and patient care can work side-by-side, accelerating the bench-to-bedside pathway and back again as clinicians feed back information about how patients respond to their new treatment. Our all-encompassing support of the bench-to-bedside research pathway has the ultimate aim of unlocking discoveries and getting treatments to patients sooner.

We've always had a strong focus on supporting early career researchers at the trust through our PhD programme and our clinical research training fellowships. This support ensures talented researchers can pursue an academic research career alongside their clinical duties. Patient outcomes are better for people treated at research active hospitals compared with hospitals with a lower research focus. Through our research funding, we help accelerate the trust's ambition to become a world-leading research active hospital.



Research that changes practice

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Our early career research funding historically supported basic researchers and clinicians to undertake a PhD. In 2000, the charity funded Professor Cherry Kilbride's PhD on stroke survivorship; her subsequent research career focusing on stroke rehabilitation has achieved national impact.

Prior to the establishment of the stroke unit and Prof Kilbride's research, stroke care at the trust was fragmented and uncoordinated, with patients being on any one of a number of wards and without specialist multidisciplinary team input from appropriate healthcare staff. Prof Kilbride's research, and the work of the team, was recognised nationally for its success in developing an exemplar stroke service at the Royal Free London and rolled out across the UK. This service reduced the mortality rate for stroke survivors to less than the national average and fundamentally changed practice, improving the lives of countless stroke survivors and their families.

"The funding was instrumental to my whole career, and it meant I went onto being able to influence policy and services nationally through work with organisations like the Intercollegiate Stroke Working Party which drives improvements in stroke care throughout the UK."

Professor Cherry Kilbride
Lead allied health professional for therapy research Royal Free Hospital;
professor of neurorehabilitation, Brunel University London

Research that brings innovative treatments to patients sooner

Clinical trials are essential to testing new treatments, devices and diagnostic tools that can make a significant difference to patients' outcomes and quality of life. Patients participating in clinical trials can get access to medical innovations that are not available as part of standard care with the potential for transforming patient outcomes. Clinical research facilities (CRFs) enable these first-in-human trials by providing dedicated space for these types of studies. CRFs have state of the art facilities, technologies and the expertise to enable this type of research.

The charity provided the initial seed-funding to set up a CRF at the trust. Our investment quickly leveraged a further £4.9m in funding from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR). This expanded the work of the CRF to deliver a five-year programme of innovative clinical research to understand, diagnose and treat a range of diseases.



"The pump-prime funding facilitated by the charity enabled us to make a compelling case to the NIHR which was rewarded with substantive funding for five years. This is a great example of how investment from the charity can leverage significant returns."

Professor Tim Meyer
Director, NIHR Royal Free Clinical Research Facility



CRF staff and systems are providing the support, expertise and structure for more clinicians to move into early phase (first-in-human and first-in-patient) studies which will expand our capacity to deliver more innovative studies. Dr Rhys Evans is one such investigator who will lead a new study for patients undergoing kidney transplant.

Patients who receive a kidney transplant have to take immunosuppressive medications every day to dampen the immune system and prevent rejection of the transplanted organ. These medications come with a number of unwanted side effects and in the longer term can lead to cardiovascular disease, infections, and cancer. This new study will investigate the use of a cell therapy made from kidney transplant recipients' own cells. The cells are collected prior to transplantation, altered and returned to the patient after transplantation. It is hoped that once inside the body, the new cells will stop the body from identifying the new kidney as foreign tissue and rejecting it. If the new treatment is safe and effective, the hope is that patients can use fewer immunosuppressive medications in the future.



"The CRF and its staff have been invaluable in setting up this study of this novel treatment that has not been tested in humans before. They have provided both myself and our department with all the support we need to get this exciting trial started."

Dr Rhys Evans
Consultant nephrologist; principal investigator for the study

The benefits of the NIHR Royal Free CRF are already changing outcomes for patients.

"In 2019, I started experiencing bad lower back pain and breathing difficulties whenever I started exercising. I was diagnosed with a very rare type of lung cancer – a neuroendocrine tumour – which had spread to my lymph glands and my bones. I underwent two lots of chemotherapy but unfortunately, as time went on, my cancer kept progressing. In need of something different, I took part in a clinical trial in 2021 at the Royal Free Hospital. My strength quickly built back up, and the scan results were positive. This trial has got me back to feeling like my old self. I'm so, so grateful for the trial and the Royal Free Hospital for accepting me onto this amazing new treatment that I hope will help many more people."

Patient, Royal Free London

Research that improves outcomes and saves scarce NHS resources

Kidney cancer is the seventh most common cancer in the UK with about 13,300 diagnosed cases each year. To differentiate between benign and cancerous tumours, a biopsy needs to be performed. However, a biopsy isn't without risks, including pain and bleeding.

We helped fund a pilot project at the Royal Free Hospital – which hosts the UK's largest specialist centre for kidney cancer – to see if a non-invasive 'sestamibi' diagnostic scan could differentiate in a safe and effective way benign and cancerous tumours reducing the need for surgery to remove benign tumours.

The project demonstrated the effectiveness of the scans and, importantly, that it was acceptable to patients. This research provided the pilot data enabling our researchers to secure a large NIHR grant to expand the study to five sites in England to see if the scan can be incorporated in those sites' patient pathways. With up to 30% of kidney tumours being benign, this has the potential to have a significant impact on patient care by providing an alternative to biopsy and reducing unnecessary invasive surgery.

"The charity's funding was critical in enabling us to perform the pilot study and essentially test the water to see if there was potential for sestamibi scans to be used for patients diagnosed with kidney tumours. The response from clinicians and patients alike was very positive, and I am delighted that on the basis of the pilot study, the NIHR is funding us to lead a much bigger study involving multiple hospitals across England. This work has the potential to reduce the need for biopsy and unnecessary surgery for benign kidney tumours, relieving patient anxiety and improving patient outcomes in the NHS."

Professor Maxine Tran
Principal investigator for the study; consultant urological surgeon, Royal Free Hospital; professor in urology, University College London

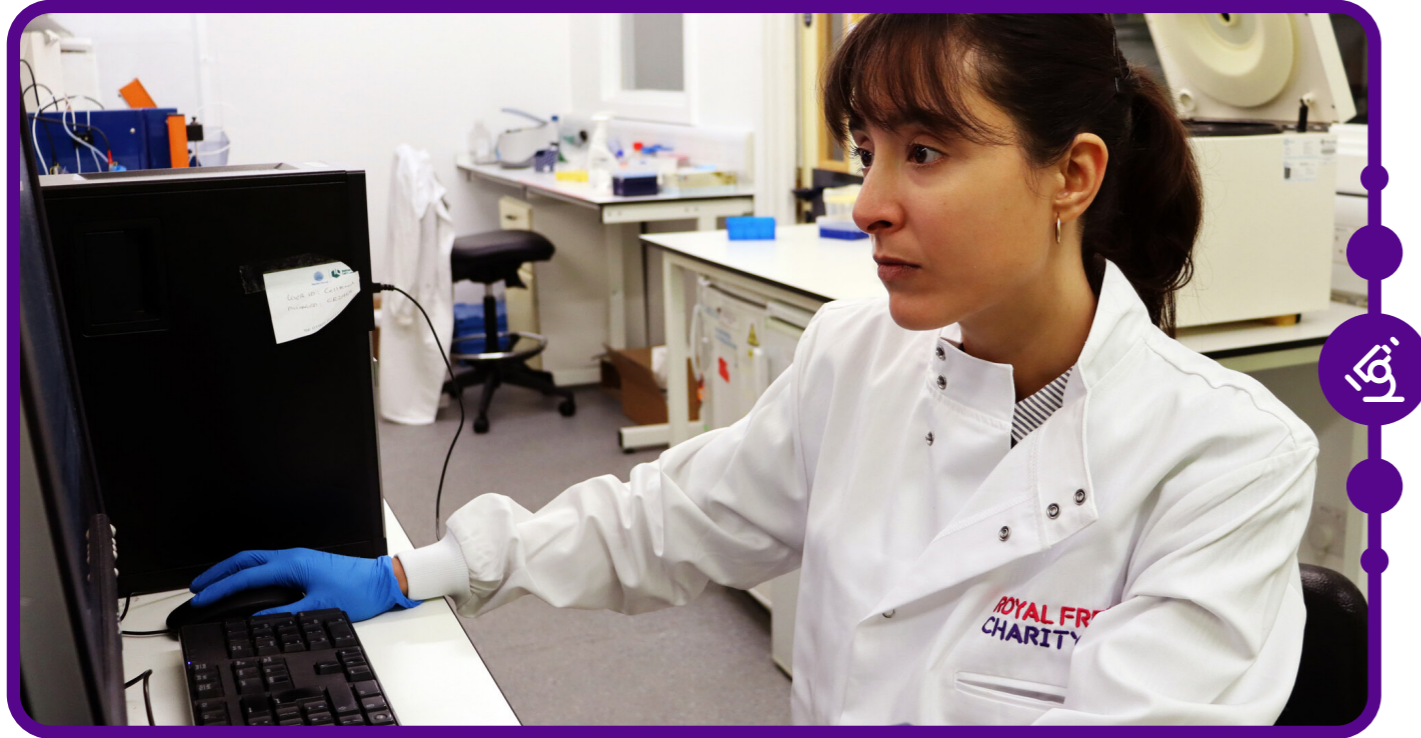


Principles

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Our approach and investment in research are underpinned by five guiding principles:

1. fund peer-reviewed research in open competition to ensure research excellence
2. ensure the patient voice is integrated across the research life cycle
3. demonstrate a clear path to impact and improved patient outcomes
4. support a broad range of clinical and medical professions to undertake research
5. foster collaborations and partnerships to maximise impact



Our overarching strategic objective

Research that eventually leads to new medications and treatments is vital to transforming patients' lives, leading to better health outcomes for the people of north central London and beyond. To drive the better outcomes that we seek, we will adopt a bottom-up approach where we partner with the trust and others to help embed a research culture that will enable this.

We will do this by helping to build the trust's research workforce, funding new opportunities to undertake novel research, providing pump-priming funding for research, and integrating the patient voice in our work, so that the research we fund is of direct relevance to patients leading to better outcomes sooner.

Aligned with the charity's strategic framework, our research strategy's overarching objective is to ensure the research we fund and research activities we undertake put patients and their needs at the heart of what we do and are of the highest quality.

Our strategic priorities

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1. Co-production

Research ideas start with a research question. People with lived experience are best placed to know whether research questions and outcomes are relevant to them. To make outcomes as relevant as possible, people with lived experience should be involved from the outset, whether that's formulating the research questions or being involved as co-applicants as part of a diverse research team. Therefore, in strategic research areas, we will act as a convenor and work proactively to bring together people with lived experience, researchers and clinicians to work in partnership. We will adopt a co-production model so that people with lived experience and researchers are equal partners in developing research questions that are the most relevant and will have a tangible impact.

In addition to the co-production of research questions, we will integrate patient and public involvement and engagement in all aspects of our research funding cycle. Aspects of this include reviewing and recommending applications for funding and co-designing the forms we use to ensure that we are asking the questions that really matter.



2. Partnerships

Multidisciplinary collaborative research is key to solving today's research challenges. Funders and organisations working together are able to go further and faster to meet those challenges than organisations working in isolation. Partnerships are key. The broad research fields and disciplines at the trust mean we cannot work in isolation. Leveraging partnership investment enables us to achieve more than acting alone by increasing the amount of funding for research, thereby maximising the impact we can achieve. We will seek mutually beneficial partnerships with other organisations where there is a clear benefit to patients and alignment with our strategic objectives.



3. Research innovation

The charity has a proud record of providing seed funding for research ideas that lead to major follow-on funding. In order for our pump priming to be truly transformative, we will seek to support novel research that is high risk but offers the possibility of ground-breaking discoveries and significant breakthroughs that could lead to lifechanging outcomes for patients.

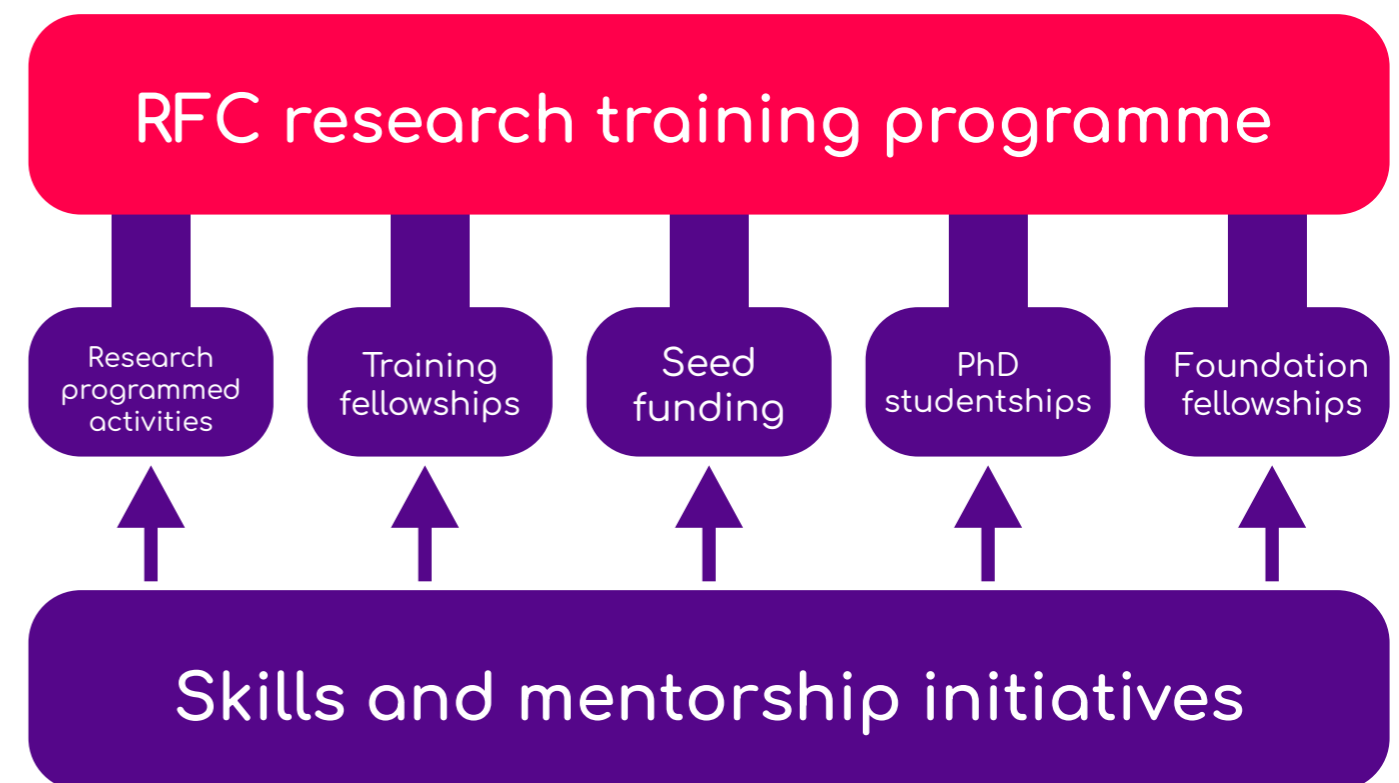
This type of funding can be challenging to secure from funders. We will therefore pilot a high-risk research innovation scheme to fund high risk/high reward research. This ambitious scheme aims to open up translational research avenues that may not be possible with conventional funding schemes.

4. Royal Free Charity research training programme

Training the next generation of researchers at the trust is key to enabling them to lead independent research projects, become the research leaders of the future, and for the trust to be recognised as a leading research-active hospital. Research funding is a major part of this. However, funding alone is not sufficient. Providing the skills that early career researchers need to progress in their careers is also important. To help drive this holistic approach forward, we will establish the Royal Free Charity research training programme. The programme will provide early career research support underpinned by skills and mentorship initiatives.

In addition to the programme being accessible to medical and basic researchers, we will also ensure that nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and other healthcare professionals who want to become research active are supported. A key aim of the programme is to foster and support diverse cohorts of talented researchers who can bring innovative thinking to their field. The programme's support will help ensure that trust staff and researchers are given early opportunities and protected time to develop their ideas and undertake preliminary research studies as they begin their research careers.

Funding through the programme will seek to encompass a range of early career support. We can tailor our funding to support researchers' needs at the right stage of their early careers. To underpin the foundations of the programme, we will develop a skills initiative and deliver training workshops to enable the trust's research workforce and early career researchers to develop their skills in areas such as grant writing and patient and public involvement and engagement in research. To further support the career development of early career researchers, we will pilot a mentorship initiative. Mentees will be paired with a mentor and gain one-to-one support to aid their research career development.





5. Research governance

The charity wants to be recognised in this sector and by other organisations as a high-quality research funder. Our membership of the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) will ensure that our research governance structures are fully aligned with AMRC standards to enable us to fund the best research with the greatest impact for patients. Membership will ensure that researchers and stakeholders can have confidence that the research we fund meets a quality threshold and has been through a rigorous independent review process. AMRC membership will give us a platform through which we can achieve our wider strategic priorities.



Five years from now

To achieve our ambition for research, we will invest strategically in research and put in place research governance structures to help deliver this ambition.

Five years from now:

- patient and public involvement and engagement will be integrated across our research funding cycle and embedded within all we do for research
- researchers, supporters and partners have confidence that the research we fund is of the highest quality.
- as well as funding clinicians and basic researchers, we will broaden the professions we support and fund nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and other healthcare professionals to undertake research
- researchers, supporters and partners have confidence that the research we fund is of the highest quality.

Help us fund research that makes a difference

Our support for the Royal Free London's research community is thanks to the generosity of our supporters. Visit [our website](#) to find out about the different ways our supporters can help us to make a difference.

