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Filling a gap in UK health services: the role of charities

The global economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is still evolving, but what is clear is that this impact is already being felt within the charity sector. A report in June by Pro Bono Economics indicated that UK charities could be facing a £10.1 billion funding gap over the next 6 months, with incomes expected to drop by £6.7 billion as demand for their support rises by £3.4 billion. On Aug 17, the UK-based transplant charity Anthony Nolan announced that it was proposing changes to its organisational structure, partly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of income that the organisation has experienced.

Anthony Nolan provides an important health-care service in the UK. A report on the aligned UK registry formed of Anthony Nolan, the blood cancer charity DKMS UK, NHS Blood and Transplant, and the Welsh Bone Marrow Donor Registry showed that between April 1, 2019, and March 31, 2020, this registry helped to identify more than 1100 unrelated matched donors for patients in the UK who needed a stem-cell transplantation, with a total of 1.9 million stem-cell donors in the registry and more than 300 000 new donors added to the register that year. However, although these achievements are laudable, it is important to acknowledge that significant challenges remain in the transplantation field, primarily that of a lack of ethnic diversity within the donor pool, which will not be helped by reduced funding to the charities that contribute to the registry.

In the UK, finding appropriate unrelated matched stem-cell donors for patients from minority and ethnic backgrounds is more difficult than for patients from white backgrounds. Many donor cells for UK patients end up being sourced from outside of the country, and the movement of these vital resources could potentially be affected by a no-deal Brexit. The NHS and transplantation charities are trying to address the lack of diversity in the UK registry by targeting cord blood donations from certain hospitals that serve areas of high ethnic diversity; however, many potential donors are missed because of restricted venues for donation. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has halted many cord blood collections altogether, further reducing the potential pool of stem cells.

The cancellation of mass-participation fundraising events has also caused a blow to the charity sector. For example, the 2019 London Marathon raised more than £66 million for charities—the largest amount in a single-day fundraising event worldwide—and although a virtual event is planned for 2020, the difference in funds raised is likely to be substantial. Coupled with a loss of donations due to the changing economic fortunes of businesses and individual donors, many charities could find themselves unable to continue operating as normal. Cancer Research UK, one of the largest health-related charities in the UK, expects to see a 30% decline in fundraising income this year, reducing the amount of research it can fund annually. Currently, this amount is about £400 million a year, but will gradually reduce over the next 4–5 years to around £250 million a year. This reduction will have a direct impact on scientists and doctors, as well as clinical trials, which are often the best opportunities for patients with relapsed and refractory cancers to improve their outcomes. Macmillan Cancer Support projects a 71% loss of earnings for their major fundraising event, which would translate into 80 000 cancer patients missing out on support from Macmillan next year. The Association of Medical Research Charities has proposed that the UK government expand its support package for charities to include medical research charities.

Apart from money and care, many charities provide trustworthy information resources for patients and families. Such resources are particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic—a time when misinformation has become so prevalent. Beyond direct service provision, charities have important roles in the health-care sector, from representing the patient voice and advocacy, to addressing socioeconomic disparities that can result in poor health and outcomes, to funding research and clinical trials. At times, it can be difficult to measure the direct impact that the voluntary sector has on health-care systems because of the complexity of these systems. However, it is clear that difficult decisions will need to be made across the charitable sector with regard to how they operate and what support they will be able to provide to patients. It is important to ensure that patients and the care they receive are not deprioritised during these challenging times. ■ *The Lancet Haematology*



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For the **report on the economic forecast for UK charities** see <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/news/charities-facing-%C2%A3101-billion-funding-gap-over-next-six-months>

For **Anthony Nolan's announcement** see <https://www.anthonynolan.org/news/2020/08/17/anthonynolan-announces-proposed-restructure>

For the **report on the UK stem cell registry** see https://www.anthonynolan.org/sites/default/files/2266ST_StateOfTheRegistry_1920_v6.pdf

For the **projected research funding by Cancer Research UK** see <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-news/press-release/2020-08-17-join-cancer-research-uk-for-a-very-2020-race-for-life-5k-event>

For **Macmillan's report** see <https://medium.com/macmillan-press-releases-and-statements/flagship-coffee-morning-fundraiser-facing-its-toughest-year-in-more-than-a-decade-macmillan-af7033086dc0>

For the **AMRC's proposal** see <https://www.amrc.org.uk/blog/government-must-act-now-to-save-charity-funded-research>

For more on the **infodemic** see [World Report Lancet 2020](https://www.thelancet.com/world-report-2020); 395: 676