

13 Research for the right reasons: blueprint for a better future

Medical research has undoubtedly contributed to better quality of life and increased longevity. Nevertheless, we have illustrated in this book how the existing ‘drivers’ for research – commercial and academic – have not done enough to identify and address patients’ priorities.

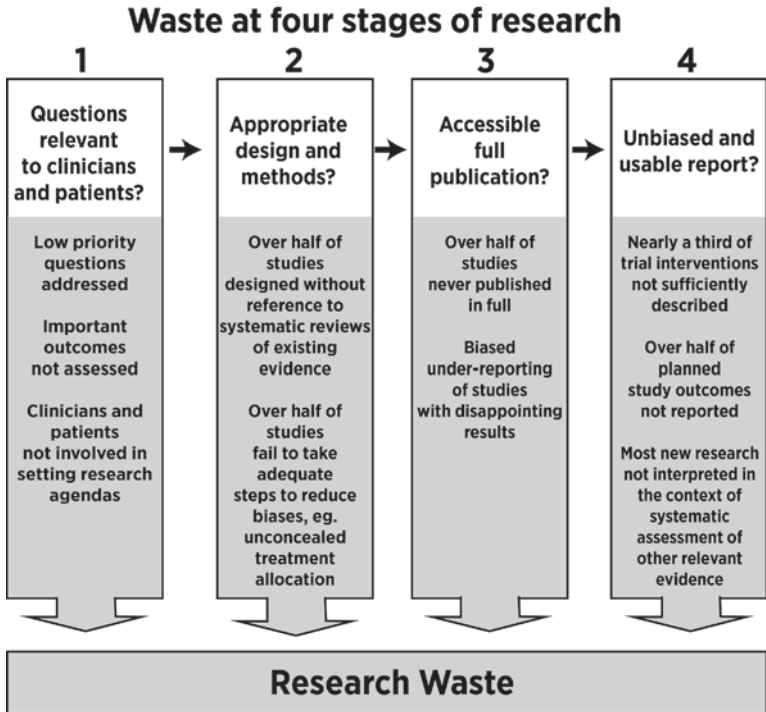
Huge sums of money – over \$100 billion every year worldwide – are spent on funding medical research.¹ However, most of this funding is invested in laboratory and animal studies, rather than in studies that are likely to produce evidence more immediately relevant to patients.

Even when it comes to deciding which questions about the effects of treatments will be studied, patients’ priorities are widely ignored. The drug industry’s financial power means it is very influential in decisions about what gets researched. Because industry can pay handsomely (thousands of pounds/dollars) for each patient recruited to its clinical trials, academics – and the institutions they work in – too often take part in clinical trials that address questions of interest to industry rather than to patients.

Regrettably, much of the money spent on medical research is wasted at successive stages – by asking the wrong research questions; by doing studies that are unnecessary or poorly designed; by failing to publish and make accessible the research results in full; and by producing biased and unhelpful research reports. This should matter to everyone – researchers, research funders, clinicians, tax payers, and above all patients.

Before setting out our blueprint for a better future, we briefly outline why, if research is to be better, it is vitally important to:

1. Ask the right research questions
2. Design and conduct research properly
3. Publish all the results and make them accessible
4. Produce unbiased and useful research reports



How the money spent on medical research is wasted at successive stages.¹

1. Ask the right research questions

Sometimes doctors do not know which treatment is likely to be best for their patients because the available options have not been properly studied. Such studies, which can have important implications for patient care, may be of little or no interest to industry or academia so important questions remain unanswered. And not answering these questions can lead to immense harm. Take one example – whether steroid drugs given to people with brain damage as a result of physical injury increase or decrease their chances of survival. Steroids were used for decades before a well-designed study showed that this established treatment had probably been killing thousands of patients with brain injury.² Proposals for this study were initially opposed by industry