

Notes on 06/19/12 conversation between

- David Carr, Wellcome Trust
- Holden Karnofsky, Co-Executive Director, GiveWell
- Cari Tuna, President, Good Ventures

David Carr works in the Strategic Planning and Policy Unit at the Wellcome Trust (WT). Around half of his job involves coordination of strategic planning for the foundation. The other half of his job consists of policy and advocacy work related to sharing research outputs. The latter includes work centered on promoting open access to publications and the sharing of research data.

WT is a research funding charity, which supports biomedical and health research and related activities geared toward advancing knowledge to improve health. The foundation tries to fund the best researchers who have the best long-term vision. David feels that one of the strengths of WT is that it tries to take a long-term view.

Some activities that WT has funded are:

- Accelerating the passage from research advances to new health care products and technologies.
- The creation of the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, a major genomics institute that was responsible for sequencing a third of the human genome in the Human Genome Project.
- Support for major research units in Kenya and South East Asia, which have been able to make significant breakthroughs in malaria control involving bed nets and the development of new drug regimes, in particular, the development of artemisinin drugs.
- The training and professional development of science teachers in the UK.

When Cari asked David what WT's most impactful activity is, David said that it's very hard to pick out a single one that stands out relative to the others because WT has funded a wide range of diverse projects.

Cari asked David where he would look for opportunities to do the most good within the areas of health and improving the output of research if he were a donor. David said that there's already a lot of investment in research and discussed the idea of putting more funding into trying to accelerate the passage from new research findings and products to health services and practices.

Holden asked how WT differs from large government agencies like the NIH. David said that WT is able to close funding gaps quicker than government agencies are, because government agencies are locked into budgetary cycles.

Shifting the subject to meta-research, David said that he thinks that there's a massive

amount of potential and unlocked value in the area of open data. He said that there would be value in gaining access to data not only from researchers, but also from governments and industry. He said that there's been a big push from the UK government to promote open data and that this is happening in the US as well.

WT is working with the Hewlett Foundation and other funders of health research to encourage more sharing of research data. Some of the activities that WT funds in the area of data availability are:

- Encouraging the researchers who they fund to share their data.
- Supporting key database resources – including the European Bioinformatics Institute, which is similar to the US's National Center for Biotechnology Information and which supplies data infrastructure for European research.
- Projects investigating the possibility of the use of electronic patient records in research.
- Long term studies that track populations over time. The largest of these is the UK Biobank which is collecting medical information from 500,000 people over a period of 20 years to build a massive data resource for research.
- Projects to ensuring that there's consistent use of meta-data collection.

David said that funding systematic reviews has not been a major focus of WT. The Wellcome Trust will consider supporting systematic reviews within the context of a broader research proposal, but does not in general support systematic reviews in isolation (the exception has been reviews relating specifically to low- and middle- income country settings). Although the Wellcome Trust has no plans at present to change this position (its primary focus is supporting innovative primary research), it would keep this under review.

He didn't recall whether WT has ever funded a Cochrane center and didn't feel qualified to give an opinion on the Cochrane Collaboration and its competitors. He said that he could talk to colleagues at WT who would be better able to answer questions about these subjects. He said that there are other organizations in the UK that are more involved with systematic reviews than WT is.

When asked what WT would do with an extra few million dollars, David said that when WT has a small project that it wants to fund, it can generally raise money to cover it, so WT doesn't have a list of proposed small projects in need of funding. He said that as a general matter, there are opportunities to fund the transition of research into policy and practice, and also opportunities related to data sets, including building of the technical capacity to link different types of data sets.