

**MQ:
Transforming
Mental Health**

www.mqmentalhealth.org



MQ: TRANSFORMING MENTAL HEALTH

Our mental health is important at every stage of our lives, from childhood to adolescence and throughout adulthood. MQ: Transforming Mental Health is an international charity dedicated to researching the causes of mental health conditions and the development of effective treatments across the lifespan. Based in the UK, MQ takes a global perspective in the mission to improve our understanding of mental illness.

In this exclusive interview, we speak with Lindsey Bennister, MQ's Chief Executive (May – November 2018) to find out more about the exciting work of MQ and their vision for transforming the future of mental health worldwide.



To start with, please can you tell us a bit about the background of MQ – one of the newest research charities, set up to specifically fund research in mental health. Can you tell us how MQ came to fruition?

MQ exists to fill a major gap in the mental health sector – bringing, for the first time, a major charity voice to champion and fund mental health research.

A start up grant from Wellcome enabled MQ to get off the ground. And since 2013, we've begun funding innovative research (with over £10 million awarded to date), growing networks of academics, charities and people living with mental illness, and, crucially, starting to build long-term public support for research.

You became the Chief Executive of MQ in May 2018, bringing a wealth of leadership experience from the charity research sector. What are your aims for MQ?

The chance to join and lead MQ was an unmissable opportunity and something that doesn't come up very often. MQ

has a unique and absolutely vital role to play in transforming mental health. It provides, through research, real hope for better understanding, treatment and support for millions of people affected by mental illness.

Over the past five years, the organisation has set out a transformative research agenda and begun to put mental health research in the public eye like never before. This presents an exciting platform for growth.

Working with the excellent and dedicated team at MQ, I am going to build on these developments to create a movement for mental health research that can truly transform lives.

We know that one in four of us will experience a mental health problem each year – yet the MQ Landscape Analysis in 2015 reports that only 5.8% of the UK's research budget is spent on mental health. Why do you think there is such a disparity between research spending and the scale and impact of mental health difficulties in the UK? What can MQ do to change this?

The disparity in funding for mental health research is stark – and, frankly, lets down generations of people living with a mental illness.

Almost 15 million people in the UK will be affected by a mental illness each year. Every family is likely to be touched in some way by its devastating impact. But not enough is being done to improve our understanding, develop better treatments and give hope for prevention.

For every person affected by mental illness, just £8 is spent on research per year. For cancer the figure is £178. This difference is unacceptable.

There is a fundamental issue underlying these figures – the lack of charitable funding for mental health research. And this is why MQ was set up. In the UK, for every £1 spent by the government on mental health research, the general public donates just 0.3p, less than half a penny. Compare that with the equivalent charitable donation for cancer: £2.75.

‘For every person affected by mental illness, just £8 is spent on research per year. For cancer the figure is £178. This difference is unacceptable.’



CREDIT: MQ: Transforming Mental Health

But the transformative role of a charity runs much deeper than just raising funds. In fact, what has been missing – and what MQ is working to build – is unprecedented public support for research, pressing Government and industry to invest more, shaping research agendas, and demanding vital progress.

History has shown us – with conditions like cancer and HIV - that when researchers, Government, industry and the public come together, huge advances are possible. To do this we need to inspire, to show potential, but also to demonstrate the impact of research.

The good news is that the timing could not be better. The UK is a world leader in mental health research and the NHS is a world leading institution. Awareness of mental illness is growing rapidly and stigma is being tackled, thanks to campaigning from leading charities and members of the Royal Family.

We're reaching a tipping point – and now is the time for mental health research.

The Brighter Futures programme aims to tackle mental health problems in young people. What are the most significant mental health problems experienced by young people and how can MQ address these? Do you think mental health difficulties are preventable?

One in 10 young people aged 5–16 has a diagnosed mental health condition – that's the equivalent of three children in every classroom. The most common conditions, depression and anxiety, have severe life-long impacts if left unaddressed. Critically, suicide is now the highest cause of death for young people.

Despite the scale of the challenge, the truth is that not enough is being done to take it on. Our methods of identifying mental health conditions remain imprecise, meaning many young people are forced to wait up to a decade for an accurate understanding of their condition. Treatments and interventions, which in some cases have barely changed for 30 years, are too often ineffective.

We know that prioritising mental health research can help us to bridge the major gaps in our knowledge, gain greater understanding and insights into mental health, and transform outcomes in the future.

Through our Brighter Futures research programme, we're funding two groups of international scientists who are building evidence-based models to universally predict and identify young people at risk of developing depression or suicidal thoughts and behaviours. We're harnessing the power of data through our Adolescent Data platform to transform research. And we're working with partners in the sector to coordinate and drive research in the field.

Taken together, our programmes provide real hope for getting young people the help they need sooner – reducing the devastating, life-long impacts of mental illness and, ultimately, saving lives.

Mental health research receives

22x less funding than cancer



CREDIT: MQ: Transforming Mental Health

The MQ Adolescent Data Platform for Mental Health Research NHS data is described as ‘an unprecedented resource for researchers and policy makers’. But where does this data come from and how will it be used?

We know that harnessing the power of data is crucial if we want to truly understand mental illness and take on the biggest challenges. And with 75% of mental illness beginning by the age of 18, the more we can understand at the earliest opportunity, the greatest long-term impact we can have.

Huge amounts of data currently exist – from within the NHS, schools and current research. But at the moment, it’s time-consuming and difficult for scientists and policy-makers to access the data or the results they need.

Our Adolescent Data Platform aims to improve the speed and effectiveness of research into young people’s mental health. Billions of pieces of data will be accessible from this platform, ranging from administrative health, social and education data, to psychological and clinical data, as well as information from research studies. This will all be held within the privacy-protecting SAIL Databank at Swansea University Medical School. The Adolescent Data Platform will anonymously bring all this data together under one roof, preparing it so it’s easy to work with and therefore speeding up research itself.

This is the biggest platform of its kind, addressing a significant gap in young people’s mental health research. It also offers the opportunity to get scientists from different fields working together, breaking down silos and building a truly bio-psycho-social model to understand mental illness. Ultimately, it will make it easier for researchers and policy-makers worldwide to use and learn from data, reducing the costs and time involved in mental health research and facilitating new insights.



One thing that seems to set MQ apart from other research charities is the large social media presence, along with substantial celebrity and politician support, as seen in the current We Swear campaign. Why you think this has been so successful?

Our We Swear campaign has been an invitation to the public to say enough is enough – that our understanding and treatment of mental illness must improve, and that research has to be at the centre of real change.

Mental illness doesn’t discriminate and can affect anyone from any walk of life. Our wide-ranging support reflects this. The celebrities, politicians, researchers, and members of the public backing us all bring their own unique stories – and a steadfast desire to champion improvements.

What’s striking is how much the idea of research has been key. While awareness is rising and stigma is being tackled, we hear from our supporters every day about the challenges they face in getting a correct diagnosis or the right treatment. Too often people are left with huge questions about their condition and what can be done to help.

Research offers hope for answers – and that’s what drives our supporters, and all of us, in what we do.

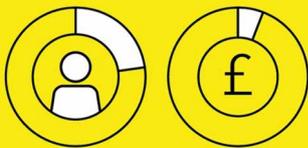
Finally, what do you see as the biggest challenges facing mental health research over the next decade and how do you think the MQ can address these?

Clearly increasing the amount of research funding available is a major challenge ahead. And this relies on building unprecedented public support.

'We're reaching a tipping point – and now is the time for mental health research.'



Despite affecting **23%** of the population, **less than 6%** of UK health research funding is spent on mental health.



CREDIT: MQ: Transforming Mental Health

To do this, we need to work with colleagues in the sector and our supporters to demonstrate the potential impact of research and – in the next decade – begin to show improvements made as a result of the work we do.

In tackling mental illness, a major challenge we face is that there is no single cause. There are many risk factors that have been identified that

increase risk of mental illness, including trauma, poverty, and biological factors such as genes. Progress will come from understanding how these risk factors interact with, and impact on, each other. At MQ, we are funding several projects that aim to do just that – the goal being that, one day, we may be able to identify someone who is at high risk of becoming unwell early on, so that we can intervene early to prevent mental illness from impacting their life.

Addressing challenges within the sector are key too. To make advances, we need to break down siloes – both within the mental health community and within research. At MQ we fund research across scientific disciplines – and champion projects that look to combine areas of expertise. We also hold one of the largest international mental health science meetings annually, bringing together experts to share knowledge and foster collaborations.

Finally, it is critical to make sure that the views of people affected by mental illness inform and drive the development of research into the future. Without the involvement of those with lived-experience, we cannot hope to address the most pressing challenges and deliver the ground-breaking progress we desperately need. This is precisely why raising awareness of the issues surrounding mental health and engaging with the public at large are so important to MQ.

www.mqmentalhealth.org/

MQ Transforming mental health through research