Medical research charities are hugely important parts of the UK’s research funding landscape. The biggest players, such as Cancer Research UK and the British Heart Foundation, contribute hundreds of millions of pounds to research and enjoy widespread public support. Yet in the mental health field, there is no equivalent organisation, says Ms Joyce: “When you start digging into the sector, it becomes a glaring gap in research funding. ”

MQ, launched in 2013, aims to fill this gap. Its origins go back to discussions between Sir Mark Walport, then Director of the Wellcome Trust, and MQ’s Chairman, Dennis Stevenson. Their enthusiasm about the potential of recent advances in neuroscience to have a positive impact on mental health problems resulted in the establishment of MQ. With £20m seed funding from the Wellcome Trust, the charity has the longer-term vision of becoming self-sustaining through public fundraising.

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It is well recognised that mental health is a Cinderella area, particularly bearing in mind the enormous burden of disease associated with mental illness. This neglect extends to charitable funding of research. For every pound spent by the Government on cancer research, the charitable sector spends £2.75, and for heart disease the equivalent figure is £1.35. For mental illness it is 30p. “So the gap is huge,” says Ms Joyce.

MQ has a clear long-term vision – to reduce the burden of disease. It has adopted a cross-disciplinary view of mental health, says Ms Joyce: “It isn’t enough any more to say you can look for the causes of disease just on a biological basis. You have to look for social and psychological inputs as well.”

The charity has adopted three key themes:
• improving current treatments (medical/pharmacological or psychological)
• improving understanding of mental health disorders
• supporting talented early-career researchers with the insight and vision to be the future leaders in the field.

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MQ therefore has a strong translational focus. It is exploring opportunities to develop additional research programmes around the cause, treatment or prevention of mental illness that are likely to include various types of discovery-oriented research. At the same time, MQ is committed to the concept of refinement or redeployment of existing therapies: “Our interest in improving current treatments sets us apart from a lot of other medical research charities.”

She is also hoping that calls with near-term goals, including the Psy-IMPACT programme, will begin to generate concrete evidence that research can make a practical difference, to help build public support: “We’re hoping to produce results that we can take to the public and say ‘look, research can help to improve things and here’s how it does it.’ ”

A new director of fundraising has recently been appointed, and will mastermind MQ’s efforts to develop its public profile. As well as generating funds for research and other activities, Ms Joyce hopes work with the public will also improve understanding of mental health conditions and reduce stigma.

MQ aims to complement advocacy activities of existing mental health charities, which have worked tirelessly to tackle stigma and improve service provision. Its emphasis will be on arguing for research funding that better reflects the burden of disease – something no organisation currently does on a national platform. Despite its standing start, MQ has ambitious aims, says Ms Joyce: “thanks to support from the Wellcome Trust and other early investors, we have a unique opportunity to build something really amazing here in the UK. How often does that happen?”

MQ: Transforming mental health. www.joinmq.org/