Reviewer's report

Title: The 10 largest public and philanthropic funders of health research in the world: what they fund and how they decide

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Reviewer: Fabio Zicker

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revisions:
This is a laborious work of trying to summarize and consolidate a wide range of public and philanthropic funding for health research. The paper has some potential interest to those working in this field, but it is not very useful to the overall global health research community with regard to the contribution for transparency, synchronizing funding efforts and the description of what and how the donors fund, as proposed by the authors. Another point that deserve consideration is what is reported as “health research”, according to the reviewed organizations.

It seems the two questions: what they fund (i.e. type of research - basic, applied, R&D, social economic research, priority areas, specific themes, conditions for funding, etc.) or how they decide what to fund? (i.e peer-review of competitive grants in response to calls, direct pro-active funding in selected priority areas, seed or matching funding, funding for partnerships, networks, research funding built into larger development projects, etc.) are not sufficiently answered by the paper.

By narrowing down the inclusion criteria and excluding some categories of funding, it seems that large proportion of resources and modalities of funding are excluded from the review of the broad health research scenario. From the description of the sources of data available it seems that “health research” funding can be a broad category in the expenditure, commitment or budget reports.

In assessing expenditures the authors expressed their interest in reviewing only funding provided directly to research project or investigator-funding. If this is the case, this should be stated upfront in the paper, and explained how this information could be extracted from the reports. As indicated by the authors several generalizations were made to be able to report data across funders.

Given the diversity of funding organizations, funding allocation and reporting, and the difficulties in classifying funding according to the criteria proposed, the highlighting of top ten public and philanthropic funders within specific criteria for health research funding does not make much sense. More interesting would be to know the top intramural funders, top extramural funders (or proportions), funders/funding focused on less developed countries, funding on targeted groups of diseases, or funding associated to development programs.
The issue of priority setting is mentioned on a few occasions and was used to justify some exclusions; however, priority setting was not an explicit issue to be addressed by the paper.

There is limited discussion of the findings and tables presented. The discussion is focused on the literature available on the topic and mostly on the limitation of the study. However, a very positive outcome is the establishment of the website www.healthresearchfunders.org. to start building a more comprehensive mapping of health research expenditure.

My recommendation would be to rewrite a succinct paper presenting much less details of the funding, but highlighting the differences between funders with regards to modalities of funding and reporting, focusing on what is needed for improving comparability of reporting which could be achieved with the web site created.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.