The Cancer Research Campaign

What is it famous for? The Cancer Research Campaign (CRC) is one of two rival charities that dominate cancer research funding in the UK — the other being the Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF). But most British people are probably more aware of the CRC’s charity shops, which are on almost every high street.

How did it begin? In 1923, a group of clinicians, who felt that the work of the ICRF had reached a “dried up condition of stagnation”, founded the British Empire Cancer Campaign for Research, the forerunner to the CRC. According to Sir Walter Morley Fletcher — who, in his capacity as first secretary of the Medical Research Council, co-ordinated all British medical research at the time — the founders of the CRC showed “almost avowed rivalry, not untinged by hostility” to the ICRF. This rivalry continues to this day, albeit less overtly.

Does it have much money to give away? The CRC spent £56 million (US$89 million) on research in 1999. Compare this with the £23 million spent by the UK government on cancer research last year.

Where does the money come from? About 87% of its £69 million income in 1999 came from legacies and donations. The CRC’s chain of charity shops raised £4 million. The charity has also become more inventive with its fundraising in the past couple of years. Through a partnership with the International Star Registry, anyone can name a star in the constellation of Cancer, in return for a small contribution to the CRC. The charity has also entered into endorsement partnerships with the likes of Kellogg’s, the breakfast cereal makers. It remains to be seen whether the amount of effort devoted by the CRC to getting publicity for the partnerships will be justified by the returns.

Where is it based? The charity’s fundraising and media relations machinery, and its grant administrators, are based in its headquarters in central London. The CRC’s one-stop cancer information service — staffed by biomedical professionals — is also based there.

What’s it like to work there? Well, whether or not it makes a difference to the atmosphere there, men are very much in the minority. Although the present Director General of the CRC (Gordon McVie) is male, women make up 88% of the 825 staff at headquarters. TV crews and reporters seem to be ever-present.

What does the CRC have its own labs? No. Unlike the ICRF, which directly employs scientists at its own labs, the CRC provides funding purely through research grants, although it also provides personal support in the form of fellowships and studentships. This allows it the flexibility to support scientists no matter where they are based (within the UK), and it avoids expensive overheads for bricks and mortar.

Has it funded any well-known work? Yes. David Lane, co-discoverer of the p53 tumour suppressor, and Mike Stratton, whose team identified and cloned the breast cancer susceptibility gene BRCA2, are two of the 1,300 scientists funded by the CRC.