Last month’s referendum result has shaken the UK’s clinical research community to the core, with anxiety levels sky high over the country’s ability to remain at the forefront of therapeutic advances.

In her news feature (p14), Roberta Ellison examines the likely impact the decision to leave the EU will have on drug research. Her findings do not make reassuring reading, with experts and researchers talking of “huge consequences”, none of them good.

**Clinical trial regulation**

With new EU legislation designed to level the research playing field due to come into force in 2018, there is a distinct possibility that the UK could find itself left on the bench when it comes to both commercial and public funding.

Although the leave campaign branded the European Clinical Trials Directive “hostile to the networks of scientists and entrepreneurs that the world needs to solve problems”, it failed to acknowledge the efforts made by researchers and legislators to reform the rules relating to clinical trials.

The latest EU regulation, designed to modify the Clinical Trials Directive, has been widely praised by researchers. Cancer Research UK says it will “help us beat cancer sooner” and the pressure group AllTrials, which campaigns for transparency in clinical research, dubbed it “fantastic”.

**Pharma retreat**

Now that the complex process of disengagement from the EU looks certain to be instigated, huge doubt hangs over the funding of clinical trials in the UK. With the possibility of being outside a common regulatory framework, it is likely that pharma companies will look elsewhere to base major trials.

Before the referendum, ABPI chief executive Mike Thompson had warned: “UK trials could face delay, as companies would deprioritise Britain for a more collaborative and harmonised approach available inside the EU. This would be a backwards step for patients and for the NHS.” With rarer conditions, it is not possible for a single country to recruit enough subjects for meaningful research and the solution of pan-European recruitment may no longer be a possibility.

On another front, restrictions on free movement will render the UK an unappealing destination for EU researchers and put UK scientists looking to boost their CVs by working in European labs at a disadvantage. And any economic downturn precipitated by Brexit will lead to an inevitable decline in both government and charitable funding, as seen in the recession of 2008–09.

Of course, all this was known before the poll and leading scientists queued up to warn of the likely disastrous consequences of a leave vote. Now, with the original Brexeters all but invisible on the political stage, the research community and patients who may no longer be eligible for inclusion in clinical trials, are left to count the cost of their antiexpert agenda.

**Rob Munro**

Publisher