



Public, Political, Scientific Advocacy

The Australian Society for Medical Research

Submission to:

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

Inquiry into Funding Australia's Research

June, 2018

Declaration of interests

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) represents members from the health and medical research sector including researchers from universities, hospitals, research institutes, medical colleges and patient groups.

Some members are recipients of funding from the Australian and/or State Government bodies, including the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and the Australian Research Council (ARC).

ASMR receives direct funding from the NHMRC for ASMR Medical Research Week®, a public outreach program that raises public awareness of medical research in Australia.

The Australian Society for Medical Research

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is the peak professional body representing Australian health and medical researchers. In addition to the more than 1600 direct members, ASMR represents the sector through more than 70 affiliated professional societies, medical Colleges and patient groups, representing an additional 18,000 people actively involved in health and medical research. Our corporate and disease related foundation memberships bring a further 100,000 Australians with an interest in health and medical research into association with ASMR. Our mission is to empower research for health and wellbeing, with a vision for a healthy, equitable Australia.

The ASMR is comprised of research active health and medical researchers from across the sector. This group is best placed to identify new trends and expectations for the next generation of research leaders. The ASMR has an unparalleled record of investigating and quantifying the engagement and benefits of research to the Australian community and economy. Furthermore, by communicating directly to schools and community groups about medical research, the ASMR has an immediate and first hand understanding of community perceptions and needs. The ASMR is the unified voice for the Australian health and medical research sector, and is well positioned to submit its recommendations to a review on research funding in Australia.

Enquiry Terms of Reference

The diversity, fragmentation and efficiency of research investment across the Australian Government, including the range of programs, guidelines and methods of assessment of grants

The process and administrative role undertaken by research institutions, in particular universities, in developing and managing applications for research funding;

The effectiveness and efficiency of operating a dual funding system for university research, namely competitive grants and performance-based block grants to cover systemic costs of research; and

Opportunities to maximise the impact of funding by ensuring optimal simplicity and efficiency for researchers and research institutions while prioritising delivery of national priorities and public benefit.

Preserving the integrity of Australian science and research

The diversity of research in Australia is reflected by the diversity of funding programs supporting it. There is an ever increasing trans-disciplinarity of science and research, driving new outcomes and new opportunities for Australia. The advent of the MRFF has raised significant concerns within the health and medical research community over the transparency of research funding disbursements and the integrity of peer review.

If the Australian tax payer is to remain confident in the Australian research workforce, then research funding in Australia must be guided by an overriding principle of transparency and independent expert peer review to oversee delivery of the transformational outcomes.

The taxpayer has a rightful expectation that their money will be used to support the best possible, high quality research that will deliver the best outcomes. Science and research funding should not be the bastion of those with the loudest voices and most emotive topics. It should not be an outcome of those with direct access to the responsible minister of the day. Science and research funding should be subjected to the most rigorous levels of peer review, so that questions may be asked to determine the feasibility of a particular study, whether the resources and expertise are available to ensure the study's success, and constructive critique can be made to improve the overall proposal.

Independent expert review has underpinned the success of Australian scientific endeavour, supported through agencies such as the NHMRC and ARC. The use of independent expert review by funding agencies to judge the scientific quality and merit of one proposal against others has previously come under attack. However, independent expert review is a constantly

evolving process, and whilst changes might be made to improve the overall peer review process, the overarching principle should never be abandoned.

It can be argued that there is room to improve efficiencies within the research funding ecosystem in Australia, and consolidate duplicated programs. However, this cannot be at the expense of one of the pillars of scientific endeavour, peer review.

If Australia is to continue building its outstanding scientific workforce, it must also invest in improving the standards of peer review to ensure the continued delivery of transformational global outcomes. The ASMR makes the following recommendations:

1. **Ensure that people involved in the review process are adequately trained for whatever role they might play.** The provision of training for reviewers (and authors) of proposals varies greatly across the spectrum of funding bodies and research institutions; in many cases training is off-the-cuff or not provided at all. Encouraging these bodies to work together to develop standards, applicable across the health and science sector, will help ensure researchers have a better understanding of the independent expert review process and are well equipped for any role within this process.
2. **Strengthen the policy and standards of the grant review system.** Strong policies and standards at all points of the review pipeline are paramount to creating an equitable and transparent expert review system.
3. **Improve the efficiency of the review processes.** Improved efficiency is important for all involved: the applicants, reviewers and funding agencies. The NHMRC is acutely aware of the need for change, as evidenced by their extensive consultation in developing a revised peer review pipeline soon to be announced.

Summary

Australian research and innovation generates significant benefits to Australia and the world, with directly measurable outcomes, such as, improved medicines and medical devices, health care, quality of life, economic returns and generating knowledge for the betterment of human kind.

This sort of innovation can only be maintained through securing the future workforce and long-term structured investment into the Australian research. Underpinning this, must be a This is a critical component of maintaining a future research workforce, equipped with the skills and creativity to drive increased productivity and improved health outcomes for all Australians.

Underpinning all research funding in Australia should be a guiding principle of transparency and independent, expert review to ensure the best research is being supported and that research is delivering the best outcomes for all Australians, ensuring the health and prosperity of our Nation and the consolidation of a world leading knowledge economy



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