

# EMPOWERING RESEARCH, FOR A HEALTHY AND EQUITABLE AUSTRALIA

2019 FEDERAL ELECTION  
ASMR STATEMENT



Prepared by the Australian Society for Medical Research  
[www.asmr.org.au](http://www.asmr.org.au)



**Public, Political, Scientific Advocacy**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Australian Society for Medical Research acknowledges that for more than 60,000 years the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been and continue to be the traditional owners of the land that we share. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water and culture. We pay our respect to their elders past, present, and emerging.





**In the lead up to the 2019 Federal Election, the ASMR calls on all political parties to commit to**

1 / INVEST 3% OF TOTAL HEALTH EXPENDITURE ON HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH

2 / COMMIT TO FULL CAPITALISATION OF THE MRFF

3 / PROTECT INTEGRITY OF PEER REVIEW FOR RESEARCH FUNDING

4 / SUPPORT THE OFFICE OF THE NHMRC

## SUMMARY

Australia is privileged to have one of the best evidence-driven health care systems in the world, underpinned by the best health and medical researchers. As we face ever increasing health challenges, we must plan and prepare to safeguard the health and prosperity of all Australians.

The ASMR has outlined an evidence-based plan to deliver a dynamic and vibrant research ecosystem, providing the security and freedom to imagine, create and innovate.



## THE ASMR

Since 1961, the Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) has been the peak professional body and the unifying voice representing Australian health and medical researchers. In addition to almost 1000 direct members, the ASMR represents the sector through over 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 well-being, with a vision for a healthy and 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. In 2003, the ASMR broke new ground, commissioning the first report of its kind to quantify the health and economic benefits of medical research. Since that time, the ASMR has commissioned a further five reports from Access Economics and Deloitte Access Economics that support the need for greater investment into a sector that forms one of Australia's economic pillars. This evidence informs the ASMR election statement for 2019.



## FROM THE PRESIDENT

Australia is a nation where discovery and curiosity are interwoven throughout its history; where for more than 60,000 years, its people have been driven by an innate desire to understand the natural world around them and apply this knowledge for the benefit of all. From First Nations people using the movements of the moon and the stars to understand the tides and navigate the land; to their detailed knowledge of plants and the land that translated into medicine and agriculture. Fast forward to modern Australia, where people from all backgrounds continue to make remarkable contributions to our understanding of science and medicine.

We are living in a dynamic and ever-changing world, facing unprecedented health crises: obesity, cardiovascular disease, cancer, Alzheimer's, opioid addiction and mental illness are amongst the immediate health challenges that Australia faces. We are now feeling the impacts of climate change around the world, raising new health challenges related to infectious disease, food and water security and health challenges we have not yet even considered or imagined. Australia must place itself at a state of readiness and ensure that the health and medical research workforce is positioned to immediately tackle these challenges as they emerge.

As we approach Federal Election 2019, the ASMR asks current and future political leaders to commit to a new investment model for Australian health and medical research that is underpinned by a fully transparent, independent peer-review.

We must ask ourselves, what sort of nation do we want to be in coming decades? A global leader in health and medical innovation or a nation that is continually trying to keep pace? We have all the elements for a winning formula: evidence that health and medical research provides exceptional returns and a highly skilled workforce. We are ready to tackle the challenges of the future. Enhanced Government support for health and medical research will be a cornerstone in shaping a 21st century society founded on a strong knowledge-based economy, a healthy population and social equity.

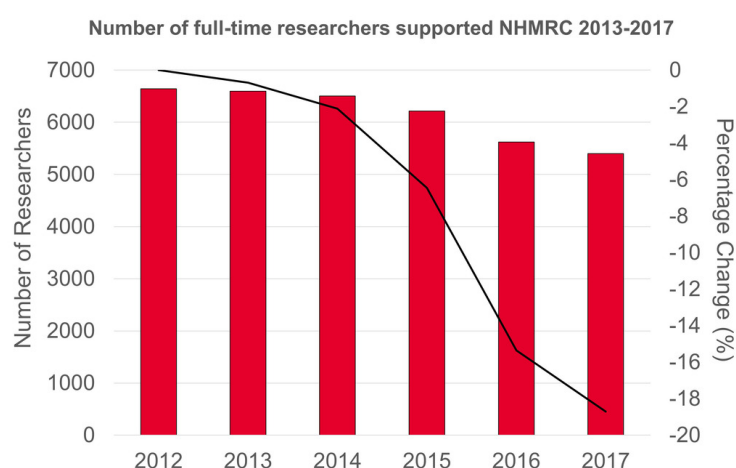
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Yazbek'.

Roger Yazbek  
ASMR President, 2019

# AN INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY

WITH EXCEPTIONAL ECONOMIC, HEALTH AND SOCIAL RETURNS

- Every \$1 invested into Australia's health and medical researchers via the NHMRC returns an average of \$3.20 in health, economic, and social benefits,
- Boosting the workforce by 40% could deliver returns of \$35 billion to Australia



The full-time health and medical research workforce supported by the NHMRC has decreased almost 20% since 2012. This means a loss of almost \$4 billion in net benefits.

The unsustainable costs of the projected health challenges will directly affect the future health care of all Australians. Investment into Australian health and medical research has delivered better health care for Australians and people around the world. For almost a century, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has overseen the distribution of research funding in Australia, using a series of robust processes that are directly underpinned by transparency and peer-review.

Almost 50% of project applications submitted to the NHMRC are considered of high scientific quality and worthy of funding, but could not be supported because of lack of funds. The ensuing instability of the research ecosystem has meant many researchers are forced to take their intellectual capital overseas or to other industries, meaning breakthrough research is not being translated into tangible returns for Australia.



# A NEW INVESTMENT MODEL

Australia's current investment into health and medical research through the NHMRC and MRFF equates to 0.53% of total health expenditure.

ASMR's recommendation is to lift this investment to 3% of total health expenditure.

**"FUNDAMENTAL AND TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH ARE BOTH PART OF THE SAME THING - KNOWLEDGE - YOU REALLY CAN'T HAVE ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER. CUTTING INTO ONE OF THEM NECESSARILY DIMINISHES THE OTHER." – PROFESSOR HOPE JAHREN**

This investment model will create a predictable and sustainable health and medical research ecosystem. It will ensure that Australia's army of scientists and researchers are primed to address immediate and emerging health challenges, mitigating the rising and unsustainable cost of health care and the burden of disease Australia is facing, and delivering economic gains.







# INVEST 3% NHMRC+MRFF

**\$58B**

NET ECONOMIC  
BENEFITS

**60K**

NEW JOBS

**3K**

LIFESAVING  
RESEARCH  
PROJECTS  
PER YEAR

The ASMR is asking for an immediate injection of \$350 million to the NHMRC to mitigate the decline in the health and medical research workforce and put the sector back on a sound footing.

The ASMR then proposes a 6 year implementation plan that will generate \$58 billion in health and economic benefits, create new job opportunities, and also lead to ongoing expansion to the science and innovation economy.

# HOW DOES AUSTRALIA COMPARE?

"PUNCHING ABOVE OUR WEIGHT" - BUT FOR HOW MUCH LONGER?

- The USA spends \$169 per person on health and medical research through its National Institutes of Health
- Australia currently spends \$40 per person through the NHMRC & MRFF



At the end of 2016, **1 in 4** Australian researchers did not have job security for 2017

Despite having the most expensive healthcare system in the world, the US still invests 1.1% of their total health expenditure directly into health and medical research

## What is your health worth?

**USA**  
**\$169**  
per person



**Australia**  
**\$40**  
per person

# AUSTRALIANS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

In the last 80 years, there have been 11 Australian recipients of a Nobel Prize, for their work and contributions to a better understanding of human health and disease.



# ROTAVIRUS VACCINE

- Rotavirus is the leading cause of severe diarrhoea in infants and small children around the world.
- In 1973, Australian scientist, Professor Ruth Bishop led a team of researchers at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne that discovered Rotavirus.
- Professor Bishop and her team found that severe diarrhoea caused by Rotavirus infection killed as many as 870,000 children every year, more than 90% of which were in the developing world.
- This ground-breaking, fundamental science led to the development of the Rotavirus vaccine.
- Professor Bishop's pioneering discovery has reduced child hospitalisation for Rotavirus by up to 90% in high income countries and 60% in low income countries.



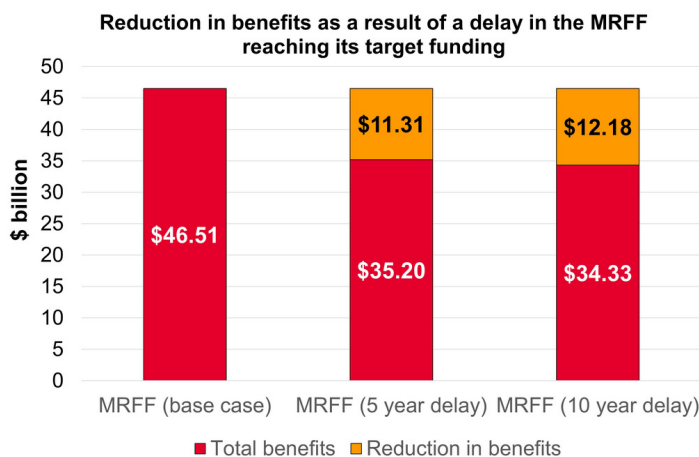
# FOLATE & PREGNANCY

- Neural tube defects are birth defects of the brain or spinal cord that usually happen in the first month of pregnancy.
- In 1989, research by Australian scientists, Professor Carol Bower and Professor Fiona Stanley revealed the key role of dietary folate in reducing the number of babies born with neural tube defects.
- Their research found that mothers with high folate levels had low rates of neural tube defects.
- This contributed to worldwide research showing that neural tube defects could be reduced by up to 70% with enough folate in very early pregnancy.
- In 2007 the Australian Federal and State governments introduced compulsory enrichment of bread-making flour with folate.
- This pioneering Australian research has led to a significant reduction of neural tube defects in children worldwide.



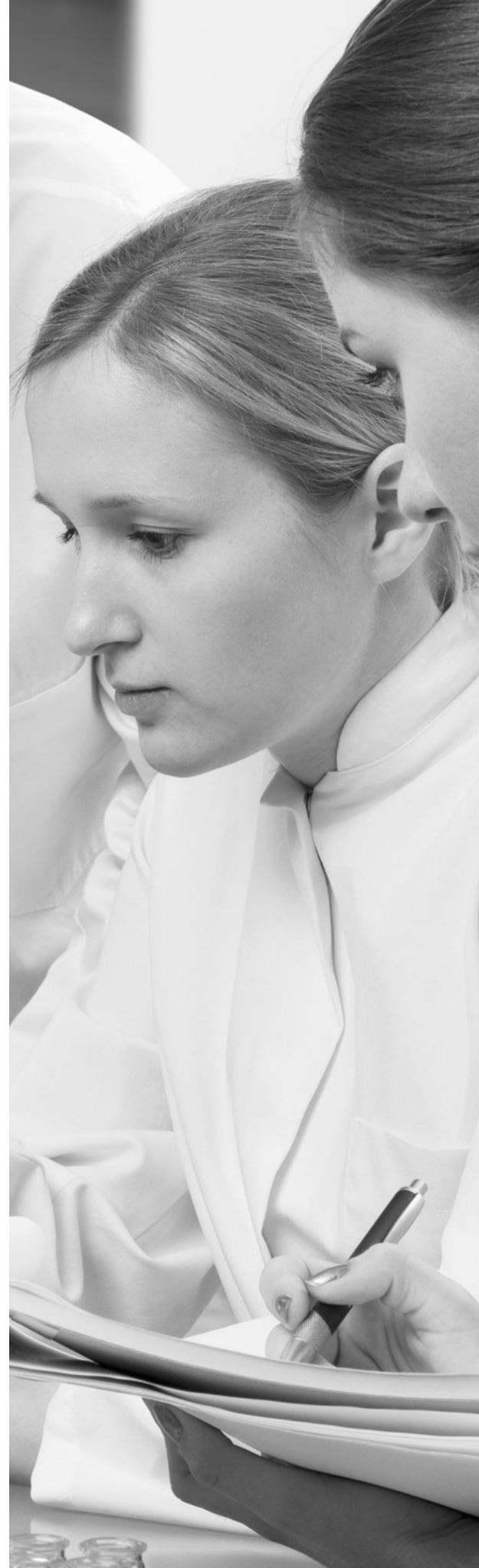
# MEDICAL RESEARCH FUTURE FUND

The Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) will ultimately support the translation and implementation of research discoveries and should form part of a holistic investment strategy for health and medical research. However, if the fund fails to reach full capitalisation, Australia risks not realising the full potential of this investment. Deloitte Access Economics has determined that a delay of just 5 years from 2021 means that health and productivity benefits are reduced by a total of \$11.3 billion.



## ASMR Position

The ASMR seeks commitment to full capitalisation of the MRFF to support research translation and implementation as an integral part of the research pipeline.



# COMMIT TO INDEPENDENCE OF RESEARCH FUNDING DECISIONS AND TO EXPERT PEER REVIEW

## PEER REVIEW: THE CORNERSTONE OF EXCELLENCE IN SCIENCE

Genuine progress in any field of endeavour can only be achieved through the advancement of novel ideas that subsequently withstand questioning and criticism from experts in that field. Deciding the merits of one research pursuit relative to another is a matter of judgement and debate; it requires a broad range of expertise, the absence of bias and adherence to consistent and transparent processes. It is not a task that should rest with a single person.

The integrity of this decision-making process is particularly important in the context of awarding research funding through competitive schemes. To achieve integrity, the international research community relies on a process of independent expert (or peer) review, where non-conflicted experts are solicited to provide constructive feedback on a research proposal and assess it against explicit criteria. The process of independent expert review ensures a level of rigour that provides confidence, for both the research sector and the general public, that funding is awarded based on merit.

## ASMR POSITION

- All decisions to award public funds to research are only made following (i) an open call for applications, with clear assessment criteria, category descriptors and a realistic deadline, and (ii) a rigorous and transparent process of independent expert review of applications.
- Remove any political interference from the awarding of research funds.
- Increase transparency around how funding initiatives align with the MRFF Strategies and Priorities.

# SUPPORT FOR THE OFFICE OF THE NHMRC

## **SUPPORTING EXCELLENCE IN AUSTRALIAN HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH**

For almost a century, the NHMRC has been tasked with improving the health and well-being of Australians. In addition to distributing the majority of federal funding towards health and medical research, the NHMRC is also tasked with developing codes and guidelines to inform research conduct, clinical practice and healthy living, administering Acts of parliament relating to working with human embryos, and supporting improved research governance and ethics.

The broad scope of NHMRC activities is managed extremely well by the Office of the NHMRC, given the limited size of their staff (<200) and budget (~\$40 million). However, assuming more MRFF schemes will be administered by NHMRC over the coming years (as recommended by ASMR), this level of performance will not be sustainable without an increase in the NHMRC administrative budget.

### **ASMR POSITION:**

The office of the NHMRC should be given responsibility for administering the application, assessment and reporting processes for MRFF grants, distributed through a separate and independent stream to the Medical Research Endowment Account. To cope with this additional burden while maintaining the rigorous grant assessment processes for which the NHMRC is renowned, the budget of the office of the NHMRC should be increased and adequate resourcing provided as needed.

# CONCLUSION

- Invest 3% of total health expenditure on health and medical research
- Commit to full capitalisation of the MRFF
- Protect integrity of peer review for research funding
- Support the office of the NHMRC

**"EMPOWERING RESEARCH FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING WITH A VISION FOR A HEALTHY AND EQUITABLE AUSTRALIA"**

The ASMR has developed a sound, economic business case to protect Australians from the economic and health challenges facing our nation. The ASMR's recommendations will ensure the health and prosperity of our Nation and the consolidation of a world leading knowledge economy.



## KEY RESOURCES

- Deloitte Access Economics. Australia's health and medical research workforce: expert people providing exceptional returns, 2016,
- ASMR Health and Medical Research Workforce Survey. Building knowledge, supporting innovation, 2016.
- Deloitte Access Economics. Extrapolated returns from investment in medical research future fund (MRFF), 2014.
- Deloitte Access Economics. Extrapolated Returns on Investment in NHMRC Medical Research, 2012.
- Deloitte Access Economics. Returns on NHMRC funded Research and Development, 2011.
- Deloitte Access Economics. Exceptional Returns The Value of Investing in Health R&D in Australia, 2008.
- Deloitte Access Economics. Exceptional Returns The Value of Investing in Health R&D in Australia, 2008.
- Access Economics. Exceptional Returns: The Value of Investing in Health R&D in Australia, 2003

These reports and other information can be found at [www.asmr.org.au/factsheet-and-reports](http://www.asmr.org.au/factsheet-and-reports)