

the Australian Society for Medical Research



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Federal Budget, 1998

AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL RESEARCH REMAINS UNCHANGED.

The decision to increase the Federal Government's budget allocation of \$50.5 million to National Health & Medical Research Council (NHMRC) for medical research to redress a projected 30% drop in the NHMRC budget was welcomed by The Australia Society for Medical Research (ASMR). The ASMR acknowledges the support of the Minister for Health and Family Services, Dr. Michael Wooldridge, to maintain the NHMRC budget at its current level. Such a commitment is a partial recognition of the value which Australian researchers contribute to Health and Medical Research. Australia provides 2.5% of worldwide medical research quanta, and ongoing support is required to see this maintained.

The Budget announced no real change in support to the NHMRC, currently at \$168m in 1997/98 and by 2001-02 the allocation is only \$175.4m.

The Federal Government's decision to maintain the NHMRC budget at a steady state level will ultimately reduce Australia's research input to all endeavours of medical research. The NHMRC, Australia's premier Medical Research funding body, controls the direction of Australia's research in cancer, hypertension, AIDS, public health issues, and development of training programs.

The lack of commitment to the NHMRC by the Federal Government is counter intuitive to the funding given to other areas of health announced in the 1998 budget. If Australia's ambition is to provide first world health care, as it should be, a coordinated program supporting general health concessions and incentives, funding to hospitals and to medical research needs to be realised.

Highly skilled Australian researchers will pursue careers in other countries such as the US where there is a viable health and medical research sector.

In March, the Federal Government announced a Strategic Review into Medical Research in Australia. This followed an unprecedented announcement by Bill Clinton to double America's equivalent to the NHMRC, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) budget within the next five years. Many of the submissions to the Australian Strategic Review on Medical Research (announced March 6, 1998) have echoed similar thoughts on such a level of commitment to Medical Research in Australia.

The Australian Government's decision to maintain the NHMRC budget at approximately \$10 per Australian to the year 2002 is in stark contrast to the American Government decision to increase the NIH budget from US\$59 per head of population to US\$108 per head of population by 2002.

It is unrealistic to expect that Australia can provide first world health care if the Government will not support and expand the future development of the medical research sector.

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