

the Australian Society for Medical Research



Newsletters, News and Events
Submissions

February 9th, 1998

The Hon Warwick Smith MP
Minister for Family Services
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

Re: National Strategy for an Ageing Australia

The ageing of the Australian population will bring important social and demographic changes to our country. With average life expectancies of both men and women steadily increasing the burden of illness is now being dramatically shifted to the aged. The Australian Society for Medical Research has already documented that medical research is one of the most cost-effective means of increasing the health and well being of the population and of reducing the costs of morbidity and mortality. As such, a major investment in increasing the health of older Australians will result in greater productivity and economic activity while significantly reducing the demands of this sector of the population for services such as health and aged care, social security, etc. The ASMR believes that an increase in medical research expenditure to 5% of the health budget will return significant long term financial savings and increased social benefits.

The ASMR is especially pleased the Minister recognises that the time frame of the impact of a National Strategy for an Ageing Australia stretches from the present and over the next twenty to fifty years. This is particularly important as many areas of both research and public health that affect the quality of life in old age are primarily determined or most efficiently managed over an entire lifetime. Consistent with these time frames we offer specific suggestions of activities for pursuit in the short and long term.

Short term goals that the strategy should target include improved disease diagnosis, management, treatment and prevention. This will result in research targeted to understanding the cause, progression and potential new treatments and cures of those diseases which are responsible for morbidity and mortality in older Australians. This would include work on cancer, heart disease and stroke, pulmonary disease, diabetes, dementia etc. We also believe that urgent research is needed into improved palliative care so that death is met with dignity. Immediate and direct increases in research activity in these areas would translate into improved health and quality of life.

Fundamental discoveries in biomedical research will arise that are of direct relevance to ageing. We need a strong research base to contribute to making these discoveries but perhaps even more importantly so that we can capture the benefits for Australian society. A recent example of such a fundamental breakthrough has been the exciting discovery that the activity of the enzyme telomerase critically regulates the ageing process (see attachment). Over recent years, research on telomerase had been undertaken with an emphasis on understanding and developing potential new treatments for cancer. Now, this new research promises one of the first ‘hard’ targets for which ageing itself may be directly treatable.

In the longer term we must recognise that good health and socially productive lives in older Australians are the results of a lifetime’s investment in health. Thus, for example osteoporosis is a major disease of ageing and represents a direct cost of well over one billion dollars each year to the Australian community. However, research has shown that the best prevention for osteoporosis in older age is to ensure that peak bone mass is achieved at puberty through good diet and exercise. Similarly, obesity and its predisposition to adult onset diabetes is the greatest contributor to blindness in our society, yet individuals do not simply become obese once they reach old age rather they represent a lifetime event. Similar arguments also apply to the consideration of cancer and heart disease, the largest causes of death and disability. New information on the causes and progression of these diseases and how they can be treated and prevented, can be readily achieved through an increase in the Australian medical research effort. This new information must also be translated into public health campaigns that target young people today so that in twenty to fifty years time the health of Australias population is among the highest in the world while the percentage of GDP devoted to the health budget is one of the lower figures internationally. Investment in research now is the way in which these twin goals will be achieved.

The ASMR wishes all older Australians ‘good health’, one of the most common things we celebrate in our society. To be able to meaningfully deliver this salutation, we urge a strong and immediate focus of the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia be to significantly increase the levels of health and medical research.

**Peter Schofield
Director, ASMR**

**Steven Wesselingh
President, ASMR**