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Medical Research and Public Health Research Consultation  
Chief Executive Officer Unit  
National Health and Medical Research Council  
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**RE: Comments on NHMRC Strategic Plan**

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is delighted to comment on the NHMRC Strategic Plan and a national strategy for health and medical research and public health research.

**ASMR is dedicated to the design, development and implementation of health policy.** The ASMR is the peak organisation representing the health and medical research workforce in Australia as evidenced by 1400 direct members and affiliations with 72 specialist societies, medical colleges and patient groups. The ASMR network reaches 140,000 Australians involved, or having an interest in, health and medical research. ASMR has a proud 50 year history in public, political and scientific advocacy with a particular interest in the design, development and implementation of new and better policies for improving the health and wellbeing of all Australians and health and medical research workforce-related matters.

**The draft strategic plan is ambitious.** It is pleasing that the NHMRC draft strategic plan and national strategy for medical research and public health research is ambitious and of significant scale. This strategy unequivocally supports all research relevant to health across the 4 pillars of health and medical research: biomedical, clinical, public health and health services research which is necessary for strengthening our highly skilled workforce and for the lives of Australians to prosper through better health and well being.

**Visionary leadership is key to meet Australia's future challenges.** Australia is currently in unique times, as we face the major health challenges of an ageing population, potential diseases related to global warming and other challenges such as dementia, cancer and diseases in the aboriginal communities. The greatest hope in meeting these challenges is research which expands our knowledge base and brings solutions embracing prevention, treatment and cure. Visionary leadership is of utmost important, perhaps now more than ever. ASMR believes that the strategy for the future outlined in the draft NHMRC consultation paper shows the visionary leadership this country needs. ASMR welcomes the NHMRC's strong support for research, creation of knowledge and its translation into practice, building capacity in human capital and bricks and mortar, being a good international citizen and engaging in international partnerships and support.

**Health and medical research is the mainstay of health and well being.** It is gratifying to see acknowledged that at the heart of health and better patient outcomes, is medical research

and that the strategic plan strongly supports the continuation and improvements of a variety of schemes which fund basic discovery and translation into practice by investigator driven project and program grants, people support by the fellowship scheme, special initiatives, and development and expansion of the targeted calls for research. These schemes not only underpin creation of knowledge but also the maintenance of a highly skilled workforce: one of Australia's golden eggs. Targeted research and special initiatives will become increasingly important as the effects of the aging population, global warming and other diseases reach their zenith. NHMRC needs to be in a position of preparedness; to respond rapidly to health issues, most notably epidemics and pandemics, which have potential major health implications; to do this Australia must have the workforce ready for deployment. A prime example was the timely allocation of \$7 million to react to the swine flu outbreak, in which 41 research projects were approved for funding in a very short time frame. ASMR believes this preparedness by the NHMRC is now more than ever critical to respond to the impacts of new and unfamiliar diseases.

**The centre-piece of building capacity is human capital.** In agreement, NHMRC needs to continue with their successful strategy of building Australia's research capacity by supporting the best and most talented researchers and welcomes that NHMRC intention to reshape support to expand and enhance capacity beyond traditional research. At the centre-piece of building capacity is human capital. "People make science happen". Australia is fortunate in that the Rudd government has a priority area of 'making our workforce the most highly skilled in the world'. Australia already has a highly skilled and respected health and medical research workforce. It is therefore an imperative to create an appealing environment which attracts and retains its talented medical researchers. An environment that is rich in career opportunities, has financial flexibility, demonstrable cutting edge research, access to state of the art technologies and a workforce which is dynamic and mobile! Australia is unique in the global health and medical research community in that it has a national career fellowship scheme supported by the NHMRC. ASMR calls upon the NHMRC not only to fully fund fellows but fund all candidates ranked 'outstanding' and 'excellent'. The research output by fellows is impressive and certainly more than justifies continuation and expansion of the scheme. However, many of Australia's best and brightest have been missing out on NHMRC fellowship support due to the requirement for entry being extremely high as a direct result of limited funds. Undoubtedly, as a consequence, the workforce is under considerable strain [1]. In the richly competitive international environment, it is critical that Australia keeps pace. Expanding the fellowship scheme not only make sense in the immediate short term given that a significant amount of funding (\$430 million) has been injected to improve the capital infrastructure of various medical research facilities around Australia but also for the long term leadership and productivity of the sector, necessary elements to meet the future health challenges we face. Clearly, any diminishing of this valuable workforce would not only result in the loss of a substantial investment but would put at risk future health (and economic) benefits to the country.

**Substantial investment and financial flexibility is essential for this strategic plan to work.** ASMR believes that, for the success of such a strategy, substantial investment is needed and funding flexibility essential. ASMR does not see this strategy as plausible if the current funding mechanism, being cyclical and unpredictable, continues. After this fiscal year, unless further investment is secured, funding of the NHMRC will be static and thus in real terms declining. This not only erodes investment to date and the momentum of discovery but will significantly limit the aims of the strategic plan and constrain progress. All levels of the community appreciate that health and medical research is not a short term investment. It is a long term investment, taking time to achieve projects of scale and national importance, for the translation of basic discovery into practice, and to produce a wide and deep workforce. This why ASMR believes it makes sense to reform funding policy in this country in order to lock-in long ranging 'sustainable' investment which guarantees the

strength and diversity of our world-class research, enabling us to continue to deliver strong economic returns [2] and improved health outcomes. Recent data by Manton et al [3] reveal that long range investment in National Institutes of Health (USA) correlates with staggering improvements in health. The study shows that investment in health and medical research has reduced the number of heart, stroke, cancer and diabetes related death with beneficial outcomes ranging between 10-25 years. ASMR agrees that international engagement plays a part not only in building capacity but in securing greater investment in Australian health and medical research through international partnerships and philanthropic investment. Furthermore, NHMRC needs to put in place new and better schemes to leverage greater incentives for industry and philanthropic funding. Australia performs poorly internationally on funding from private and public sources and thus further investment is needed both from the public and private sectors both within Australia and off shore. Failure to invest in human capital will undoubtedly cost us potential future gains in discoveries that would generate new and better preventative measures and treatments.

**Workforce mobility is important for creating a dynamic research culture.** ASMR also believes that the workforce needs to more mobile (and thus flexible), which will not only lend itself to rapid response to particular diseases, changes in national priority, but also contributes to widening and deepening the workforce. Workforce mobility is important for creating a dynamic research culture. The European research and development sector shows mastery in mobility as a direct consequence of the Framework 7 Programme. In light of the draft strategic plan on the table, mobility is essential.

**Cultivating more flexibility and equity will make the research environment more appealing to Australian and overseas researchers.** It is a step in the right direction that flexibility around fellowship appointments such as the opportunity for career breaks and career diversion be accepted into the system for circumstance of family commitments and for appointment in other health related jobs including industry and policy. ASMR welcomes the initiative to explore improved objective benchmarks for the peer-review process to enhance transparency and equity in the fellowship scheme.

**Australia must commit to a new order of regional union.** It is important to cultivate international projects, partnerships and global collaboration similar to that of the European Framework 7 Programme and also to create and enhance these relationships with Australia's neighbours, joining perhaps an Asia-Pacific region union not unlike that of the 27 European countries which make up the Framework 7 Programme. The European research and development sector has a common commitment to be the best knowledge – based centre of the world by committing 3% of GDP to science, industry, innovation and research. As a result of this Europe is set to eclipse other leading nations such as America and Japan, with a research culture building in momentum. Given the reality of Australia's GDP, it is clear that the future must include commitment to a new order of regional union which will have the capacity to stimulate growth in the sector and sustain investment at a level impossible for Australia to achieve alone.

**NHMRC has an important role in evaluating efficacy and productivity of its schemes.** Governments have a duty to monitor measurable productivity from investments. It will be essential to provide the government of the day with a clearly articulated message backed by substantiated data that investment in health and medical research delivers a significant benefit to the health and economy of Australia. NHMRC has an important role in this and is well placed to examine the outcomes of health and medical research including understanding workforce dynamics, issues, efficacy and productivity.

It is important for all aspects of health and medical research that monitoring and ensuring the peer review process of all schemes is undertaken appropriately in all facets including internet

based technologies which must achieve a seamless, user friendly system which attracts rather than repels.

### Summary

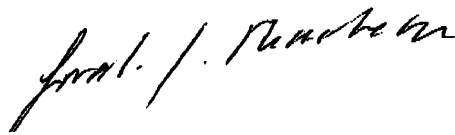
Health and Medical research is a long term investment requiring long term strategies for substantial investment and workforce planning, both underpinned by visionary leadership which will lead to the creation of a highly dynamic research culture.

Health and Medical research is a long term investment requiring long ranging investment

- Increased 'sustainable' investment through. policy reform
- Enhancing Australia's capacity through development of a regional union eg Asia-Pacific
- Maintaining and expanding other overseas partnerships
- Creating a well-planned workforce
- Increased human capital
- Further infrastructure

Attracting and retaining the best and the brightest

- Increased human capital
- Fully funded research
- Creating a clear & sustainable career structure
- Increased mobility of the workforce eg European research experience
- Flexible & equitable work environment
- Cultivation of collaborations & partnerships between sectors & around the world
- Having user friendly NHMRC processes



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### References

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