



August 14, 2009

NHMRC PARTNERSHIP CENTRES OF RESEARCH EXCELLENCE CONSULTATION PAPER

Thank you for the invitation to comment on the NHMRC Partnership Centres of Research Excellence Consultation Paper.

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is the peak body representing health and medical researchers in Australia. Through more than 1,300 direct members and affiliations with 72 specialist societies, medical colleges and patient groups, the ASMR network reaches an additional 140,000 Australians involved, or having an interest in, health and medical research.

The ASMR strongly supports new initiatives for medical research that have the capacity to enhance Australian health and health care. The Partnership Centres initiative is a highly appropriate strategy for promoting and enhancing collaborative research that directly facilitates changes in health and health care systems. Thus, the implementation of this program will improve the translation of research outcomes into new health policies, which are aimed at benefiting the well-being of all Australians.

ASMR welcomes the opportunity to provide more specific comments on some of the key issues identified by Research Committee:

4.2 Nature of Centres

ASMR supports the preference for a few well-funded Centres rather than many Centres at a lower level of funding. We also acknowledge the necessity for the Centres' theme focus to be broad, forward-thinking and not disease-centric, to avoid duplication with existing facilities. However, within these parameters there is a strong need for focus on indigenous health issues and the implementation of health care policies aimed at alleviating the disproportionately high incidence of disease in this section of society.

4.3 Themes Shape and Scope of the Centres

The Partnership Centres initiative also provides the potential for increasing the translation of health research into Australian owned products. Historically, many Australian research outcomes have bled their financial gains to overseas entities. For example, only 13% of Gardasil royalties are returned to Australian entities (Exceptional Returns II, 2008). Thus, the promotion of collaborative partnerships between the Centres and Australian-owned entities would be an incentive for returning financial benefits to Australia. Accordingly, the selection criteria for collaborative partnerships should be carefully and strategically monitored to ensure that both health and financial benefits are focussed on Australia.

4.5 Partnerships

ASMR supports the expectation that the objectives of the Centres are long-term. The unique challenges involved in establishing the Centres and moving them towards realising their potential should be reflected in a meaningful and realistic renewal assessment after a minimal initial funding period of 7 years. Furthermore, in order for the proposed partnerships to be sustainable beyond the NHMRC funding period and thus, of enduring value clear strategies should be in place to implement and facilitate hand-over to other funding sources.

4.7 Other Issues

Staffing. While acknowledging the need to continue to attract the best national and international researchers into the Centres, ASMR supports the necessity to modify review procedures to accommodate the backgrounds of investigators from both the research and health system sectors. Careful consideration should also be given to the continued career development of these investigators, be that within the current NHMRC-funded schemes or through the establishment of parallel pathways where appropriate.

Application process. Given the accepted uniqueness of this collaboration, the selection criteria for Stage 1 - 'a strong track record for the investigators in collaborating effectively with each other' may be ambitious. There may be value in establishing NHMRC-funded workshops at this initial stage of the application process to facilitate more cohesive planning going forward.

We thank the NHMRC for giving the ASMR this opportunity to comment on the Partnership Centres initiative. We would be delighted to provide clarification on the above or any additional information.

Dr Sarah Meachem (ASMR President)

Dr Alison Butt (ASMR President-Elect)

Dr Emma Parkinson-Lawrence (ASMR Executive Director)

Dr Mark Hulett (ASMR Immediate Past-President)