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**RE: Pre-Budget Submission**

We write on behalf of the Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) to request **strengthened support in the 2008 Federal Budget for a sustainable career structure for the health and medical research (HMR) sector workforce.**

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is the peak body representing health and medical researchers (HMRs) in the country. In addition to the more than 1100 direct members, ASMR represents the sector through 47 affiliated professional societies, medical Colleges and patient groups, representing an additional 15,000 people actively involved in HMR. Our corporate and disease related foundation memberships bring a further 100,000 Australians with an interest in HMR into association with ASMR. Our mission is to foster excellence in Australian HMR and to promote community understanding and support through public, political and scientific advocacy.

The investment by the Australian Government in HMR has resulted in significant economic and social benefits for Australians. Recent improved health outcomes include a pioneering treatment for stomach ulcers and the groundbreaking development of a vaccine for cervical cancer. In terms of a positive economic benefit to Australia, the 2003 Access Economics Report (*Exceptional Returns – The Value of Investing in Health R&D in Australia*<sup>1</sup>) indicated that for every \$1 invested in Health and Medical Research, there is a \$5-\$8 return to Australia's Economy. These economic benefits include the generation of 3,500 to 4,000 knowledge-based jobs resulting from the commercialization of HMR discoveries. It should be noted that ASMR has recently commissioned Access Economics to update the *Exceptional Returns* report, the findings of which will be published in late April 2008.

A strong highly skilled HMR workforce has been fundamental to the impressive advances in Australia's health and wealth. Australian medical researchers perform outstandingly in terms of the quality and quantity of publications internationally. Despite recent increases in Government HMR funding, a number of indicators including the results of a recent survey commissioned by ASMR of its members to address employment conditions and career structures, have suggested that there remains a significant degree of dissatisfaction among the Australian HMR workforce, particularly in regards to the insecurity of employment in the sector and lack of financial support for research<sup>2</sup>. Most striking was the statistic that 46% of respondents indicated that as a result of employment insecurity and/or lack of funding that they had moved overseas or were contemplating moving overseas. Additional tangible evidence that there is a "Brain Drain" problem in the Australian HMR sector is the well-publicized departure overseas of many leading researchers. These data indicate that the significant investment in Australia's HMR workforce is at risk of being lost if funding is not sustained which in turn will lead to knowledge-based social and economic loss.

Many major economies such as Europe and Singapore have implemented large HMR funding initiatives in recognition of the significant benefits of a strong HMR sector to health and economic wellbeing. These initiatives include substantial programs to attract and retain HMR researchers. Similar programs including the Federation Fellowships and Australia Fellowships have been implemented in Australia, however these are few and aimed at the very experienced and highest achievers.

A particular area of concern in the HMR workforce is support of the mid-career researcher (7-12 years postdoctoral). The mid-career researchers comprise the up and coming workforce and represent the future of HMR. The NHMRC provides a national "people support" career program that underpins much of the HMR in this country. Currently, the NHMRC supports mid-career researchers through a Career Development Award (CDA) program that feeds into the senior Research Fellowship scheme. In the 2006 CDA round there was a 26% success rate for applicants. For 2007 CDA the number of applicants more than doubled from 180 to 380 and despite the injection of some additional funds into the program, the success rate is likely to be significantly reduced. This was in part a result of the introduction a new 2-tiered CDA award that expanded eligibility from 9 years postdoctoral to 12 years postdoctoral, however it clearly reflects the increasing pressure on the system. The introduction of the second CDA tier was aimed at reducing the recognized significant "jump" required to gain entry into the senior Research Fellowship scheme. There are currently only around 280 NHMRC Research Fellows and the standard for entry into the scheme is extremely high, with only the outstanding (top 5% internationally) and ~7.5% of the excellent (top 10% internationally) ranked applicants being successful. The difficulty of breaking into the Fellowship scheme is creating a "logjam" of mid-career researchers unable to progress their careers in the traditional NHMRC people support scheme, which as outlined above is generating dissatisfaction and insecurity that has permeated down the system. The results of the ASMR workforce survey clearly indicate that "Brain Drain" in the HMR sector is a very real problem and will continue to be a threat unless the NHMRC CDA and Research Fellowship schemes are better supported. The ASMR applauds the Federal Government in their recognition of the difficulties of not only HMR mid-career researchers but of those across all research fields with the recently announced initiative to provide 1000 mid-career research fellowships. We urge the Government to adequately recognize the HMR sector in this new Fellowship scheme.

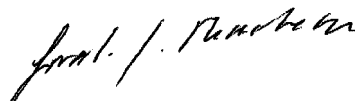
***The Treasurer's call for community input into the new Government's first budget included the priority area of "making our workforce the most highly skilled in the world". Australia already has one of the world's most highly skilled and respected HMR workforces. As outlined, Australia is at risk of the diminishing of this valuable workforce and as a consequence the loss of the substantial investment in building this workforce and the future health and economic benefits to the country. In the current richly competitive international research environment Australia needs to attract and retain it's talented medical researchers. The ASMR further urges recognition of the value of the HMR workforce for the provision of adequate resources for an attractive and sustainable career structure for Australian medical researchers. We would be delighted to provide clarification on the above or any additional information.***

Yours sincerely,



Dr Mark Hulett

ASMR President



Dr Sarah Meachem

ASMR President-elect

1. Access Economics. *Exceptional Returns: The Value of Investing in Health Research & Development in Australia*. In; 2003. <http://www.asmr.org.au/Campaign/campaign.html>
2. Kavalaris M., Meachem S., Hulett M., West C., Pitt R., Chesters J., Laffin W., Boreham P. and Khachigian K. *Perceptions of Health and Medical Research Careers: The Australian Society for Medical Research Workforce Survey*. (Submitted Medical Journal of Australia).

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) Survey was conducted by The University of Queensland Social Research Centre (UQSRC) in conjunction with ASMR. ASMR invited in the later half of 2006 1,258 members to participate. Of these members, 379 completed the survey, a response rate of 30 percent.