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Research Funding and Policy Branch
Research Division
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RE: Research Workforce Strategy - Submission

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is the peak body representing health and medical researchers in Australia. Through more than 1,500 direct members and affiliations with 80 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 (HMR). Our mission is to foster excellence in Australian HMR and to promote community understanding and support of the sector through public, political and scientific advocacy. ASMR has a demonstrable knowledge and understanding of the HMR community as a result of it being closely connected to its members and actively involved in research concerning the sector's productivity^{1,2}, workforce conditions and planning^{3,4}.

The ASMR keenly supports new initiatives for HMR that have the capacity to improve the nation's health, as well as enhance the productivity of the sector particularly through the development of our human capital. The *Research Workforce Strategy* is an appropriate forum to determine the current and future challenges to the effective development of Australia's research workforce, and provides a platform for identifying opportunities for improving career pathways of Australian researchers. Our responses to key aspects of the consultation paper are provided below.

Challenges facing Australia in adapting to the changing nature of employer demand and meeting innovation aspiration over the next decade.

The ASMR strongly supports the assertion that Australia's research workforce critically underpins not only the creation of new knowledge, but also its 'dissemination and productive application' into meaningful outcomes for the wider community. However, major challenges to this continued productivity over coming decades are presented by the changing nature of how research is conducted. Maintaining Australia's competitive edge in the face of growing globalisation increasingly requires large scale, often cross-disciplinary research platforms which need to be reflected in the training patterns and flexibility of the workforce, but also in appropriate, long term funding strategies that recognise and encourage innovative, 'blue-sky' research.

Challenges facing Australia in delivering required levels of research skills to its workforce over the next decade.

As one of the most highly-skilled and productive^{1,2,5} sectors of the Australian economy, there are numerous opportunities for the HMR research workforce to readily respond to the aspirations of our future research needs, as well as to engage in the training and development of our future research workforce. Again, such potential needs to be appropriately supported and developed so that Australia remains an attractive and competitive environment within which to develop a research career.

A particular area of concern across the research workforce as a whole is the disproportionately high attrition rate of women at the mid-career stage⁴, often due to family responsibilities and the challenges of returning to the workforce after a career break. This equally applies to sections of the workforce wanting increased flexibility, for example, to transition from industry, government, or to incorporate overseas training. The ASMR considers the implementation of effective strategies to address this as an imperative.

Another area unique to the HMR sector that requires consideration is the attraction and retention of clinician/researchers into the workforce. The identification and implementation of strategies that promote the engagement of practicing clinicians into research would greatly facilitate the process of research translation, as well as ensuring the focus of research effort into areas of current or future clinical need.

Challenges facing Australia in providing productive and viable career paths to its researchers over the next decade and promoting them adequately.

The ASMR strongly endorses the report's conclusion that one of the major challenges impacting on the productivity of the research workforce is the lack of longterm career structure, mentoring and development. Budgetary constraints on the NHMRC – the major source of research funding for the HMR sector, have placed enormous pressures on both the quantity, duration and flexibility of NHMRC people support schemes at almost every career stage. Such funding pressure is not surprisingly having a significant impact on the sentiment of the HMR community – the majority of the respondents to a recent workforce survey conducted by the ASMR indicated that, as a result of employment insecurity and/or lack of funding, they had moved overseas or were contemplating moving overseas³. This potential erosion of our world-class and highly productive workforce to almost unsustainable levels will seriously impede the momentum of discovery and the realisation of prior investment into the sector. Addressing these funding deficits as well as broadening the opportunities for productive and rewarding research careers, is of critical importance moving forward.

We would be delighted to provide clarification on the above or any additional information.

Yours sincerely,

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¹ Access Economics. Exceptional Returns: The Value of Investing in Health Research & Development in Australia. In; 2003, <http://www.asmr.org.au/Publications.html>

² Access Economics. Exceptional Returns II: The Value of Investing in Health Research & Development in Australia. In; 2008, <http://www.asmr.org.au/Publications.html>

³ Kavallaris M., Meachem S., Hulett M., West C., Pitt R., Chesters J., Laffin W., Boreham P. and Khachigian L. *Perceptions of Health and Medical Research Careers: The Australian Society for Medical Research Workforce Survey*. Medical Journal of Australia. 2008 188:520-524.

⁴ Schofield D. *Planning the Health and Medical Research Workforce 2010-2019*. In; 2009. <http://www.asmr.org.au/Publications.html>

⁵ *Increasing Productivity Growth in the Australian Economy*, Submission to The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics. In; 2010, <http://www.asmr.org.au/Submissions.html>