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Minister Tony Abbott writes for ASMR

In December 2003, I released the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Performance Measurement Report 2000-2003 which shows how the research projects funded through the NHMRC have helped enhance Australia's reputation for punching well above its weight in producing ground-breaking scientific and medical research.

The 2003 Access Economics Report entitled *Exceptional Returns* further highlights the high returns on investment in medical research within Australia.

Published NHMRC-sponsored research is cited in national and international journals at more than twice the national and world averages for all other Australian health research publications.

Over the past three years, the NHMRC has invested:

- \$28 million for asthma related research;
- \$170 million to cancer control;
- \$130 million towards cardiovascular health;
- \$50 million for diabetes research;
- \$17 million for research into prevention of injuries;
- \$50 million for research on arthritis and musculoskeletal diseases; and
- more than \$80 million directed towards mental health research.

I agree with the recent editorial in *Nature Immunology*, entitled *Turning the Virtuous Cycle*. Australia now has an opportunity to cement its position as one of the premier biomedical research venues in the world.

In 2000, the Government allocated just \$185.1 million to the NHMRC for health and medical research. By 2003 Government funding to the NHMRC had increased to \$300.7 million. In 2004 this figure will increase to over \$330 million.



Hon Tony Abbott, MP

The funding provided to the NHMRC is currently being reviewed as part of the Investment Review of Health and Medical Research. The report of the Investment Review is keenly awaited by Government and will be considered in conjunction with the outcomes of concurrent reviews being coordinated through the Department of Education, Science and Training on collaboration, research infrastructure and research funding.

We live in an age of spiralling health costs. In any budgeting process new money is hard to find but the Government will do what it can to maximise Australia's investment in health and medical research.

Tony Abbott, MP

Minister for Health and Ageing

Leader of the House of Representatives

April, 2004

ASMR calls upon the Federal Government to commit to an additional \$1 billion to Australian health and medical research, phased in over the five years beyond 2004 - 2005.

ASMR's 2004-2005 Pre -Budget Submission to the Dept. of the Treasury may be viewed at

www.asmr.org.au/news/submissions

NHMRC Research Fellowships - 2004 and Beyond

The outcomes for the Research Fellowship (RF) scheme from last year are now well known (available on the NHMRC web site). These should be viewed as good news-bad news. The bad news is that 14 Fellows did not get renewed, and were offered a "6th year", during which they can reapply. Additionally, 3 Fellows were not renewed for a second time, and were offered the "Grant in aid", or 7th year. This is a difficult outcome for those affected. On the bright side there were 25 new places added to the scheme for 2004, bringing the number of RFs to 275. This is the largest single growth of the Research Fellowships. As well, the Research Committee has planned to maintain a future growth rate of 2.5% (about 6 new positions each year for up to 10 years). This highlights a strong commitment to the scheme and promises a healthy and robust future. However, a natural consequence of an expanding scheme is the increase in its competitive nature.

This year has heralded a number of changes in the RF scheme, and there are more to come. Research Committee has approved changes to the policy that have hit at the heart of some of the previous discontent. The changes could be considered "corrective", rather than fundamental. They include tightening up initial entry to the highest levels of the scheme, and any initial applicants for the high levels of appointment must clearly demonstrate the "exceptional circumstances" for their appointment and explain precisely what the NHMRC gains from their appointment, which would not have been achieved otherwise. The changes also include clarifying that the rare part-time Fellow might enable for example a parent returning to the workforce, as long as all their available time at work was dedicated to the aims of the Fellowship.

The RF scheme is facing at least one significant problem. The scheme's primary intentions are to foster

excellent medical research and to provide a career structure for researchers to engage in long-term competitive research. However many have questioned the career nature of the scheme, since those applying for renewal and those applying for initial appointment are ranked against each other in open competition. The problem is how "open competition" can be rendered compatible with the aim to provide a "career structure". As well, it is essential that the scheme continues to benefit and promote new Fellows. The Practitioner Fellowship (PF) scheme is about to reach its 5th year. It is not currently intended as a career structure and its time to think about its future. Have we got it right, or does it need improvement?

A public consultation on the above RF and PF issues will be launched to seek feedback from the scientific and lay community, from May to July of this year. The Research Committee will welcome feedback on the issues and other constructive suggestions. There will also be a forum for public discussion in each capital city. The dates will be posted on the NHMRC web site in late May.

*Phil Robinson
Chair, Research Fellowships
Committee*

The 43rd ASMR National Scientific Conference

This year a component of the ASMR initiated
**Australian Health and Medical
Research Congress**
Darling Harbour
November 21 - 26

www.ahmrccongress.org.au

\$5000

ASMR Research Award 2004

This award will support a postgraduate student member of the ASMR nearing completion of their studies or a recently graduated postdoctoral member to undertake a short period of research in a laboratory outside their home city.

The Award specifically excludes support for conference attendance and travel for an extended period of postdoctoral studies.

Further information from:

www.asmr.org.au/resfund/intro.html

Congratulations

Mary Kavurma

(Centre for Vascular Research,
Dept of Pathology, University of
New South Wales)

Winner of the \$5000

ASMR Research Award 2003

Events

**The Australian Health and Medical
Research Congress 2004**

November 21-26 2004

Darling Harbour, Sydney, NSW

www.ahmrccongress.org.au

4th Australasian Hepatitis Conference

National Convention Centre

Canberra, ACT

August 31 - September 2

**16th Annual Conference of the
Australasian Society for HIV Med.**

National Convention Centre, ACT

September 2 - 4 2004

www.ashm.org.au

5th International Breast Cancer Conf.

November 10-14, 2004

Sydney Convention & Exhibition Centre

www.tourhosts.com.au

This message is at the heart of ASMR's public, political and scientific advocacy activities in 2004. The Federal government has several reviews of research underway and faces an election this year. This offers both challenges and opportunities for ASMR as outlined in this report.

Political Advocacy

ASMR has had a two-year political strategy aimed at securing increased funding for NHMRC beyond 2004/5. The previous doubling of NHMRC funding in 1999 allowed Australia to catch up with other OECD countries. A period of flat NHMRC funding now would be disastrous, as it would see us fall further behind and miss an opportunity to capture the potential gains from Australian health and medical research.

Access Economics - Exceptional Returns

A crucial and powerful part of ASMR's campaign to increase funding was the commissioning of the Access Economics report entitled: *"Exceptional Returns: the value of Investing in Health R&D in Australia."* This report would not have been possible without sponsorship from a large list of corporations, universities, and medical research institutes. This independent economic analysis of health & medical research in Australia showed the extraordinary return derived from investment in Health R&D. On average, every dollar invested in Australian Health R&D has delivered \$5 in national economic benefit as a consequence of improved lifespan and quality of life! The report also shows the decline in public sector funding for Australian health R&D and that overall, we lag behind our OECD competitor countries.

Campaign: Building an Investment in our Future

As a consequence of this report ASMR initiated a campaign entitled *"Building an Investment in our Future"*. In this we call on the

Federal Government to show leadership by committing to an additional \$1 billion in support for Health R&D to be phased in over 5 years beyond 2004/2005. We also called on all Australian health & medical researchers to communicate the health outcomes of their own research to their local MP's and the consequences of not continuing this investment. Our campaign web page showed an incredible response - with over 1,500 hits in the first week alone. Finally, ASMR made a formal submission to Treasury for the 2004 budget, requesting the \$1 billion increase, based on the Access report.

Suitably armed, we then engaged with the Federal Government, the Federal Opposition, members of the minor parties and key Canberra bureaucrats to ensure maximum awareness of the economic outcomes of Australian health & medical research. Throughout, we have endeavoured to obtain bipartisan support for the \$1 billion increase to funding. We also formed an alliance with Research Australia (ResA) and the Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI) to jointly lobby the key stakeholders. This coordinated campaign has had a huge impact on decision makers and we hope to see the dividends of this campaign in the forthcoming year.

Investment Review of Health and Medical Research

An Investment Review of Health and Medical Research was announced late last year. Dr Moira Clay, ASMR immediate past President, was invited to be a member of the review panel. Her appointment is a testament to the high regard in which ASMR is held. This review examines the impact of doubling the NHMRC budget in 1999 and advises on future options. On behalf of ASMR, I made extensive submissions to this review. The final report has been with the minister since early March and is due for release later in April. ASMR is concerned that we should not focus exclusively on clinical or commercial

outcomes. We should remember that basic research underpins all these applied outcomes. *Curiosity driven peer reviewed research should be supported alongside both strategic health and commercial priorities.*

Infrastructure for medical research is in a woeful state and must be

upgraded and properly funded if we are to compete internationally. These and a number of other key issues should be addressed in this report. This is clearly a critical review, which is likely to shape the future direction of Australian Health and medical research for the next five years. We will be keeping members informed of developments.

Careers

ASMR has gone to great lengths to assist the careers of researchers. The ASMR scientific meetings provide a great opportunity for younger researchers to communicate their findings. In the career section on our website we also provide excellent information on grant writing, rebuttals to panel reports as well as power-point modules for career planning. However, I'm acutely aware that we have to try to do more particularly for our up and coming researchers. It was noted in a Nature Immunology editorial (March, 2004) that many of Australia's best *"senior postdoctoral researchers find themselves in limbo - the intermediate career development awards are too scarce and requirements for entry into the Senior Fellowship scheme are beyond reach."* ASMR made this point strongly to the Investment Review of Health and Medical



*A/Prof Andrew Sinclair
ASMR President*

Research. It is hoped the review will address the issue so that NHMRC can plug this critical gap in career development and retain our best research talent.

These postdoctoral fellows struggle to raise families on minimal incomes and cannot get a mortgage as most are on short-term contracts. By contrast, their peers in other professions are climbing a career ladder and being well remunerated. This is having a demoralising effect and many are opting to leave research because they cannot see a way forward. If increased funding is available it should be targeted to this Postdoctoral group. In addition, we need to think of new exit strategies, such as endowed chairs, for more senior researchers who presently represent the majority in the Fellowship scheme. Such exit strategies would create more room in the scheme for the up-coming researchers. As a research community we need to think of more creative ways to assist the careers of our best postdoctoral fellows who are often the key drivers in health and medical research.

ASMR Research Award

The ASMR research award of \$5,000 will support a postgraduate student ASMR member nearing completion of their studies or a recently graduated postdoctoral ASMR member to undertake a short period of research outside their home city. Applications are available now and close September 2, 2004. Last years winner was Mary Kavurma. Details and application forms for the award can be found on our web page, <http://www.asmr.org.au>.

ASMR Medical Research Week^(R)

ASMR's Medical research Week^(R) is our major public awareness activity. In past years we have reached a national audience of 2.8 million people. Planning for ASMR MRW^(R) 2004 is well underway nationwide.

The major focus of the week is the national lecture tour by the ASMR Medallist. The ASMR Medal is

awarded for exceptional contributions to fostering health & medical research. The 2004 medallist is Professor Mary Hendrix, Scientific Director and President of the Children's Memorial Institute for Education and Research (the research arm of the Children's Memorial Hospital and Dept. of Pediatrics at the Northwestern University, Chicago).

Her laboratory has uncovered key findings underlying the molecular mechanisms underlying cancer metastasis. She also has been an energetic and passionate advocate for science and science policy on a national level, including testimony before the U.S. Congress to obtain increased funding for biomedical research and stem cell research. She is a current member of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) Board of Directors and former President of that organization (1999-2000). Rather than committing to a particular theme for her lectures at this stage, we are monitoring the political environment to ensure the approach adopted is fresh, relevant and challenging within the context of funding for Australian Health and Medical Research.

Other activities during ASMR Medical Research Week^(R) will include Medical Research Expos, careers days, State scientific meetings, high profile public lectures, seminars, hands-on workshops for schools, rural outreach programs and more. More details about ASMR MRW^(R) events around the country are available on the website.

Thanks go to our National MRW coordinator Alaina Ammit, Cath West and Lexy Harris in the Executive Office and our range of State Branch committees (all hard working volunteers) around Australia for their work in bringing together what will be a great event, celebrating and communicating achievements in Australian Health & Medical Research.

Australian Health & Medical Research Congress

The first Australian Health & Medical

Research Congress held in Melbourne in 2002 was such a resounding success, with over 2000 registrants, 25 participating societies and over 60 trade exhibitors and sponsors that we intend to hold a Congress every second year. Planning for the second Australian Health & Medical Research Congress, to be held in at Darling Harbour, Sydney, Nov. 21-26 is well underway. Our convenor Maria Kavallaris and Program Convenor Levon Khachigian have done a fantastic job in coordinating an extraordinary list of 27 participating societies and have put together an exciting program with 40 symposia, 45 terrific international speakers. Thanks also to ASN Events for bringing their experience and expertise as events managers to assist in the smooth running of the Congress.

Australia Day Honours list

Finally, I would like to congratulate the health and medical researchers who received Honours in the Australia Day Honours list for 2004 - Professor Graham Clarke, Dr. Watson, Professor Bob Williamson, Dr. Robin Batterham, Professor Roger Short, Dr. Keven Turner, Professor Watson, Dr. Keith Williams, Professor Hopwood, Professor C. Kerr, J. Dudine and Professor F. Gibson. All should be congratulated for their work and dedication to maintaining the tradition of excellence in health and medical research.

*A/Professor Andrew Sinclair,
President, ASMR
April, 2004*

A word from the Chair of Research Committee

The “new look” NHMRC research committee for 2003-2005 combines the expertise and experience of a number of researchers from a wide variety of disciplines and institutions. It was formed as a merging of the concepts from the previous Strategic Research Development Committee (SRDC) and Research Committee itself, since these aspects of research are inextricably linked.

How do you get to be a member of research committee? There were certain stipulations with which we had to comply viz there would be members from each of the two preexisting committees, members from each state and territory, two cross members from council, a cross member from Health Ethics committee and one from Health Advice Committee, two researchers who were indigenous, researchers engaged in clinical, basic and population health research, and of course the gender distribution needed to be right! Moreover, by dint of the fact that they were researchers, members would already have a huge workload and thus had to be willing to take on an additional burden - a big ask!! Despite these stringencies, we have a wonderful committee of hardworking, dedicated people, and in our deliberations, we are supported by an excellent secretariat who work under difficult conditions.

Most members of the committee have a specific “portfolio” and the enormous workload is divided up into seven working committees - project grants, program grants, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research, people support established -fellowships etc and people support training (training awards committee, which handles scholarships postdoctoral fellowships, career development awards etc) evaluations and outcomes committee, which documents how the research we fund addresses national needs, and finally the strategic research initiatives working group which looks after a huge array of important topics including urgent research (for instance SARS), health services

research, electromagnetic energy research (are mobile phones harmful), palliative care research- just to mention a few. As well there are members who have responsibility for clinical research, gene technology issues, animal welfare, and industry and commercial interactions.

What are the important issues for this triennium? We need the budget for medical research to be increased, so that we can maintain and increase the valuable return we have demonstrated for the investment that has been made, and most importantly we need to have an enthusiastic, vital workforce of researchers to carry out the research we fund. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) research is a big ticket item, and we have called for social, behavioural and environmental researchers to join with their biomedical colleagues in collaborating on “healthy start to life in ATSI health research” grants, which will address the government’s national health priority -promoting and maintaining good health. Lastly, NHMRC research committee feels that it’s vitally important that government funding bodies work together so that this and the other national research priorities can be addressed most effectively.

Of course none of what we do would work without peer review which relies on the goodwill and hard work of you - the research community. Keep it up please!



*Professor Judy Black
Chair, Research
Committee
NHMRC*

ASMR
Medical Research Week^(R)
June 5 - 12, 2004



*Professor Mary Hendrix
ASMR Medallist 2004*

**Scientific Director and President of
the Children’s Memorial Institute
for Education and Research,
Chicago**

Professor Hendrix will be speaking
at the National Press Club in
Canberra and at the Dinners in

Brisbane
Sydney
Melbourne
Adelaide
Perth

THIS YEAR

Dinners
Scientific Meetings
Awards
Prizes
Expos
Careers Seminars
Schools Days
Schools Quiz
Workshops
Public Lectures
Debates

For further information on
Professor Mary Hendrix or Events
and Activities planned for
ASMR Medical Research Week(R),
please visit the ASMR Website at:

<http://www.asmr.org.au>

Australian Law Reform Commission, Inquiry into Gene Patents

The Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) is finalising its Inquiry into Gene Patenting and Human Health that began in January 2003. Under the Terms of Reference, the ALRC is to consider the impact of gene patents and licences especially on healthcare but also on the biotechnology sector and on research and its application and commercialisation.

The ALRC has released two consultative documents during the course of the Inquiry-an Issues Paper in July 2003 and a Discussion Paper (DP 68) in March this year. Following each release, the ALRC conducted an extensive consultation process with key stakeholders including relevant government departments, research funding agencies, biotechnology industry representatives and companies, patent attorneys, health researchers, and health consumers. Public comment was also invited on each document. Submissions to DP 68

closed on 16 April 2004. The final Report is due to be handed to the Attorney-General by 30 June 2004, and will be made public as soon as it is tabled in the federal Parliament. The ALRC has found limited evidence that gene patents and licences have had any significant adverse effect on the conduct of genetic research in Australia although there has been considerable disquiet expressed by researchers about possible adverse impacts. Issues include uncertainty about whether there is an implied research or experimental use defence in Australia, the breadth of some patents and the effect of multiple patents on commercialisation of new inventions. Among the proposals in DP 68 is the inclusion of an experimental use defence in the Patents Act to provide greater clarity for researchers. An issue for the ALRC is the scope of such a defence. The proposal in DP 68 draws a distinction between research on a patented invention, which

would be exempt and research using a patented invention, which would not be exempt.

DP 68 proposed a number of other changes to patent laws, but particularly patent and licensing practices, that would be flexible and robust to anticipate and respond to future problems. These included a proposal that IP Australia develop examination guidelines to explain how the criteria for patentability apply to inventions involving genetic materials and technologies, clarification of the Crown use provisions in the Patents Act, and some amendments to the compulsory licensing provisions of the legislation.

Further information about the Inquiry can be found on the ALRC's website at www.alrc.gov.au.

*Professor Anne Finlay,
Commissioner,
Australian Law Reform Commission*

Congratulations Prize Winners

*at the
42nd ASMR
National Scientific Conference,
2003*

Campion Ma Playoust Award

*Peter Van Wijngaarden, Flinders
University of SA*

Genzym Poster Prizes

*Andy Cheng
Children's Cancer Institute
Australia, Randwick NSW*

*and
Severence MacLaughlin
University of Adelaide*

NARF Post-Doctoral Investigator Award 2003

*A/P Chris Semsarian
Centenary Institute,
University of Sydney
and
A/P Ingrid Scheffer,
Epilepsy Research Centre,
University of Melbourne*

Research Careers

An important focus for ASMR in 2004 is the Careers Portfolio.

The website (www.asmr.org.au/news/Careers/RC.html) currently provides -

- comprehensive notes on academic and non-academic career paths
- guidelines for building a CV/resume
- information on writing a grant application and rebuttals.

The National Scientific Conference is an important venue for our young researchers to present their research in a friendly environment.

State Activities now include regional tours or rural schools days. Young medical researchers impart personal accounts of their research activities and career development, motivating and encouraging students to consider medical research as a vocation option.

Severence MacLaughlin, pictured below, with students of St Marks College, Pt Pirie, SA during a recent rural schools tour.



Investment Review of Health and Medical Research - we have highlighted the plight of senior postdoctoral researchers in Australia. When "excellent" research fellows miss out on funding, there is clearly an urgent need to plug a critical gap in career development. Postdoctoral fellows are often the key drivers in health & medical research.

Dr Jacqueline Phillips, Careers Portfolio



“The 2nd Australian Health and Medical Research Congress will provide an outstanding quality program that will promote opportunities to establish new collaborative projects and research relationships”

Dr Maria Kavallaris

Plenary Speakers

Claude Bouchard (USA, Genetic basis for health and human performance)

Judah Folkman (USA, Angiogenesis)

Matthias Mann (Denmark, Proteomics and genomics)

Jeffrey Robbins (USA, Animal models of diseases)

An additional 30 invited international speakers will be presenting at symposium sessions

21-26th November, 2004 Darling Harbour, Sydney

SYMPOSIUM INCLUDE

Angiogenesis inhibitors in cancer and atherosclerosis therapy; Cardiac hypertrophy and failure structural and cellular defects; Cell-matrix Interactions; Control of Vascular Tone in Health & Disease; Cytokines: from basic mechanisms to clinical intervention; Development of a vaccine for HCV; Environmental and genetic influences on respiratory health; From bench to bedside: translating basic research to clinical practice; Genetic determinants of bone development; Genomics and Proteomics of Cancer; Ghrelin - Is it merely a growth hormone secretagogue?; G-Protein signalling; Inherited Cancer; Integrated systems in bone biology; Integrative aspects of human muscle performance and fatigue; Intracellular communication and axon outgrowth; Microarrays and proteomics: now and the future; Modulating signalling pathways to treat/prevent disease; Molecular dissection of colon development and cancer; Molecular dissection of colon development and cancer; Molecular genetics and human disease; Monoclonal antibody therapies in allergic and inflammatory diseases: does the science translate into clinical benefit?; Moving molecules around cells; Obesity and disease; Pleiotropic effects of statins on the cardiovascular system; Scaffolds in Tissue Engineering; Stem cells and Type 1 diabetes; Stem cells in vascular and cardiac repair; Stretch activated ion channels ; Synaptic Physiology and processing in the central nervous system; The pathway to testing candidate vaccine in clinical trials; Therapeutic frontiers in bone and joint disease; Translational research; Xenotransplantation - the potential for crossing the species barrier in the clinic

ON-LINE REGISTRATIONS OPEN AT THE END OF APRIL

Online abstract submission deadline: 9th August, 2004

www.ahmrcongress.org.au

Dr Maria Kavallaris, Convenor, m.kavallaris@unsw.edu.au

A/P Levon Khachigian, Scientific Program Convenor, l.khachigian@unsw.edu.au

ASN Events, Secretariat, 03 5983 2400, congress@asnevents.net.au

AHMRC 2004



*Dr Maria Kavallaris, Convenor
Australian Health & Medical Research
Congress 2004*

27 Research Societies

Daily keynote plenary by distinguished speakers

National and international speakers

Free communications and poster sessions

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Fertility Society of Australia
Haematology Society of A&NZ
High Blood Pressure Rsh Cncl of Aus
Human Genetics Society of A'asia
NARF
Paediatric Research Society of ANZ
Perinatal Society of ANZ
Soc for Free Radical Res (A'asia)
RACP
RCof Pathologists of Australasia
RANZCOG
The Society for Reproductive Biolog.
The Aust. Med. Students Ass. Ltd.
Thoracic Society of A & N Z
Transplantation Society of ANZ
Vic Pblc Hlth Rsrch & Educ Council
Western Aust Biomedical Res Inst

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