SMR’s immediate aim is to influence the election budgetary process — a process that starts now for May 2010. In order to achieve a positive outcome the ASMR has embarked on a campaign to call you, the health and medical research community, special interest groups and like organisations, into action by educating and informing not only your local Member of Parliament and Senior Ministers but also family, friends and colleagues to tell them how important health and medical research is.

“Any price for a winner is a good price — this could be said of medical research — it is tough and painstaking and resource intensive.”

— Prime Minister Kevin Rudd

The facts are that the burden of disease is rising and without further growth in investment in NHMRC, funds are set to decline in real terms. All levels of the community need to be notified of the potential long term impact that this will have for the health of Australians and the nation’s economy, with the most immediate effect being undoubtedly on the health and medical research workforce. Investment in NHMRC is episodic and unpredictable, and reliant on the concentrated lobbying efforts of ASMR and other organisations. The sector and the health and well-being of Australians have clearly benefitted from federal government investment in health and medical research. The last substantial injection of investment in NHMRC was in 2006. The good news is that the Rudd Government in the 2009–10 Budget honoured this commitment. Australia is fortunate that the current government recognises that the sector delivers first class medical research and understands some of the issues it faces. Kevin Rudd has been quoted as saying “we achieve relatively good health outcomes with expenditure that’s below the OECD average” and “any price for a winner is a good price — this could be said of medical research — it is tough and painstaking and resource intensive”. The Australian government’s vision is to “create the best skilled, best trained and most highly educated workforce in the world — and talented medical researchers are part of the plan.” With statements like these, it’s our responsibility to ensure that all facets of government have a wide and deep understanding of the importance medical research and the workforce has to the nation.
We punch above our weight — delivering 3.0% of the total world health R&D from only 1.1% of the expenditure.

The reality is that we are now at an important crossroad. Do nothing and we will undoubtedly face a fall in NHMRC funding. The consequences of doing nothing are grave — decreases in people and project support success rates, hindered momentum of discovery, loss of our valuable first class workforce, and the associated loss of world placement. Crucially, doing nothing would result in the ultimate decline in the health outcomes and economic benefits of health and medical research. The only alternative is that we must take action to enlighten politicians and thus, if we get it right, pave the way for further investment. The Australian health and medical research sector has performed outstandingly on the global stage with our basic research output being twice the OECD average on a per capita basis with an impressively high international standing by citation, and our translational outcomes have had a major global impact. In terms of efficiency of output — we punch above our weight — delivering 3.0% of the total world health R&D from only 1.1% of the expenditure. Australia must protect its valuable workforce and thus its investment in human capital. You can have the best facilities in the world but people make science happen. Without people the facilities remain dormant. Our workforce needs to be planned and researchers better utilised to effectively meet the future needs of the nation in terms of both human and economic health. In light of the fact that the Rudd government has generously injected $430 million in upgrading some of the medical research facilities in the last budget, surely more researchers are needed to fill these spaces!

Australia has one of the highest life expectancies in the world, with our health and medical research workforce contributing to this. The history of medical research in this country is littered with success stories such as the development of Gardasil® for the prevention and treatment of cervical cancer, the invention of the Bionic ear and the research that has dramatically decreased in people and project support success rates, hindered momentum of discovery, loss of our valuable first class workforce, and the associated loss of world placement. Crucially, doing nothing would result in the ultimate decline in the health outcomes and economic benefits of health and medical research. The only alternative is that we must take action to enlighten politicians and thus, if we get it right, pave the way for further investment. The Australian health and medical research sector has performed outstandingly on the global stage with our basic research output being twice the OECD average on a per capita basis with an impressively high international standing by citation, and our translational outcomes have had a major global impact. In terms of efficiency of output — we punch above our weight — delivering 3.0% of the total world health R&D from only 1.1% of the expenditure. Australia must protect its valuable workforce and thus its investment in human capital. You can have the best facilities in the world but people make science happen. Without people the facilities remain dormant. Our workforce needs to be planned and researchers better utilised to effectively meet the future needs of the nation in terms of both human and economic health. In light of the fact that the Rudd government has generously injected $430 million in upgrading some of the medical research facilities in the last budget, surely more researchers are needed to fill these spaces!

What can you do? Write to your local Member of Parliament, write to the Prime Minister, the Treasurer and Health Minister and share with them the importance of maintaining the NHMRC budget with a moderate increase. Invite your local member to visit your organisation to showcase your research. Share the benefits of health and medical research with your family, friends and colleagues; ask them to write letters. ASMR can aid you in this process. Visit http://www.asmr.org.au/, and go to “Political advocacy” and there you will find a host of resource material to help. This includes information such as finding your local Member, getting advice on writing letters and engaging politicians, accessing the data that shows you the exceptional returns that health and medical research has on the health and wealth of the nation. To arrange for an ASMR director to come to your organisation and lay out the political and economic landscape and its implications in the short and long term, please contact Catherine West at asmr@alwaysonline.net.au

Best wishes
Sarah Meachem
ASMR President
This year’s ASMR professional development program was entitled “How To Deliver The Messages You Want To Politicians And Funding Bodies” and was held at Rydges Hotel, Melbourne on the 19th August 2009. The attendees (>70) consisted of mid-career health and medical researchers from Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney, Perth, Hobart and Adelaide. The day was professionally facilitated by Dr Moira Clay (Children’s Cancer Institute Australia) and consisted of two sessions. The first, “Science Meets Politics and the Community” focussed on interaction with the political machinery and the best way to get your message heard (and acted on). A number of speakers presented tips and tricks ‘from the inside’ including a fascinating account of the way politics works from the ex-federal Health minister Dr Michael Wooldridge with great advice like: “Whatever you do, don’t fight amongst yourselves in front of us.” Take home messages with relevance to anybody trying to extract money from government agencies included: provide solutions rather than problems, don’t whinge, team up with like-minded researchers and patient groups and bring matching funding to the table, be aware of the timing of the political process, and be succinct (in person and/or print) because you will not be given a lot of time. The session concluded with a role play where a researcher (Associate Professor Rob Ramsay) and patient advocate (Pete Campbell, JDRF) first had a meeting with Xavier Csar (Executive Director, Economic Projects Investment and Major Projects, DIIRD, Victorian Government and ex-adviser to John Brumby) who acted as an adviser to “The Health Minister” (played spectacularly by Michael Wooldridge). Rob and Pete brought $5 million dollars from the JDRF to the table and were asking for matching funding from the federal government (via the NHMRC) for more research into prevention and cure of type 1 diabetes. Pete and Rob managed to talk their way into a brief meeting with the Minister who seemed quite impressed with their pitch, however the post-meeting meeting with just the adviser and Minister present was reminiscent of “Yes Minister” in that it was both hilarious and instructive — “Just get them to submit a formal proposal and we’ll send it onto the NHMRC. Don’t worry, most likely we’ll never hear about it again.”

The second session of the day was a Grantsmanship Workshop where speakers were asked to present their key tips (based on their own success) for how to be competitive for grant or fellowship funding. Perspectives from Professor Steve Wesselingh (Dean, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University), Professor Bronwyn Kingwell (Executive Director Science Policy, Baker IDI), Professor Melissa Wake (Director, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne) and Professor Andreas Strasser (Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research) were frank, honest, informative and to the point. Again the session concluded with a role play; this time two mock grants were reviewed by a mock grant review panel. One attendee commented on their feedback form that this was “…very useful and highly applicable to my stage of career.” The overall feedback for the day was outstanding with 96% of attendees stating that day met their expectations and 94% of attendees indicating that the day had very good or excellent relevance to their career development. The ASMR plans to run similar days in 2010 and beyond, so please look out for the advertising.

Andrew Laslett
ASMR Director and Professional Development Day Convenor

ASMR Mentoring Program
Are you a mid-career researcher without a mentor? The Australian Society for Medical Research would like to invite members who are 5–12 years postdoctoral to participate in the ASMR Mentoring Program. This program was initiated as a result of feedback from participants attending the ASMR Professional Development program. Members will be matched with an appropriate Career Development Mentor. For more information and application forms please visit www.asmr.org.au/mentor.html.

Please note that applications are accepted all year round and the program is free to ASMR members.

Emma Parkinson
Lawrence,
ASMR Executive Director

See you at the ASMR National Scientific Conference "Neurogenetics Conference on the Apple Isle" November 15th to 17th
When I joined the Society in 1994, I came directly from the building industry… a far cry from the world of ASMR. I found myself pitched into an environment where members replaced clients, politicians and bureaucrats replaced contractors and understanding the political process was an imperative.

My first board meeting, a week after joining, was something of a revelation. This group of people obviously didn’t know there were some things you just can’t change or influence… problems were identified and strategies plotted to overcome or ameliorate them. This aspect of the Society has not changed at all, nor has the calibre of people who take on and live up to, responsible roles on the ASMR Board.

As a newcomer from an alien world, I was much struck by the idealism and dedication so apparent in most directors, particularly in respect of the ‘greater good’ for health and medical research and the career well-being of students.

As my knowledge of the society grew, it became obvious that while researchers must have sufficient ego to succeed in their chosen field, they were for the most part extremely humble and unaware of their strengths in the world outside their own community. Perhaps the granting process encourages humility. The great strength scientists have is, the science… Please let the rest of the world know about it (in terms they can understand)!

Year by year, the level of professionalism has increased with each board raising the bar slightly for the incoming group. Some landmark events on the road to the increased profile and power of the Society must be the expansion of the membership base to include other special societies and medical colleges (affiliate members) as well as patient groups (associate members).

This broadening of representation increased our political clout and gave us access to a very large group of stakeholders in the sector. Two other important initiatives helped to focus national attention on health and medical research and also to unify the society in a truly national way for the very first time. The first was the decision to make ASMR Medical Research Week a registered trademark and the second was the instigation of the ASMR Medallist Tour during that important public week. On the scientific front, the Australian Health and Medical Research Congress, first held in 2000, encapsulates the goals of ASMR as a multidisciplinary society and offers opportunities for unanticipated collaborations.

There have been many stand out directors and presidents over the years, some outstanding for their hard work and dedication, others for their vision and integrity, some were great communicators and savvy political animals while one in particular was incredibly courageous. It is a pity that the membership at large is not privy to the hard work, particularly of the Executive Directors and President, behind the scenes. It was no fluke of good luck that the NHMRC budget was doubled.

Cath West’s
ASMR Story

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Cath West
— ASMR’s Senior Executive Officer

ASMR Presidents, 2000–09

2000 — Robert Ramsay
2001 — Peter O’Loughlin
2002 — Peter Schofield
2003 — Moira Clay
2004 — Andrew Sinclair
2005 — Bronwyn Kingwell
2006 — Levon Khachigian
2007 — Maria Kavallaris
2008 — Mark Hulett
2009 — Sarah Meachem

Be part of ASMR’s Future

Do you know colleagues who aren’t members of ASMR but should be? Now is the perfect time to invite them to join to share in ASMR’s long distinguished history and to help carry our Society forward into the future. For more information, go to http://www.asmr.org.au/membership.html

Some Past ASMR Presidents marking the 25th Anniversary.

Back row, left to right: John Eisman, Geoff Duggan, Alan Skyring, Jock Findlay, Rob Sutherland, R.L. Dawkins, Bruce Hall, Neville Ardlie, John Healy, John Funder.

Seated, left to right: Alec Morley, Barry Firkin, Judith Whitworth, Geoff Farrell, Peter Castaldi, John Chalmers, Bill O’Sullivan.

(Thanks to Peter Castaldi for providing this photo)
in 2000 and again in 2006... managing and implementing sophisticated, successful advocacy campaigns with limited resources are an ASMR specialty. The tradition continues with the bold and ambitious goals for the future being pursued relentlessly, strategically and without fear or favour.

To all my diligent past and present directors and particularly presidents — Christine Clarke, Stella Clark, Graham Mann, Kieran Scott, Steve Wesselingh, Matthew Gillespie, Rob Ramsay, Peter O’Loughlin, Peter Schofield, Moira Clay, Andrew Sinclair, Bronwyn Kingwell, Levon Khachigian, Maria Kavallaris, Mark Hulett, and Sarah Meachem, it was and is great fun and a privilege to be part of a team who pursue goals with vigour and enthusiasm but never lose sight of the honesty and integrity which is a hallmark of ASMR. I salute you!

Cath West
ASMR Senior Executive Officer

Our Cath!

“Cath, the go to person who knew everything or how to find it out! Over 10 years later, I still call Cath if I need some vital information about health and medical research in Australia!”
— Stella Clark (ASMR President 1995)

“Cath’s appointment was, with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, one of the most important steps taken in further expanding the work of ASMR in the nineties. Her charm, skill and commitment made her a delight to work with. The success of ASMR stands as a tribute, in part, to Cath West’s strength of character.”
— Kieran Scott (ASMR President 1997)

“Cath West has been the guiding hand of ASMR for longer than we deserve. Her commitment and belief in what we have tried to do, and continue to strive for, must be challenged time and time again as each new board begins its work. She does not falter! On a personal level, Cath saved me from myself a number of times when my passion for change ran ahead of good reason and for that alone I am grateful. She taught me how to conduct meetings and introduced me to how I should move around Parliament and to bring our message to the political process. These experiences have had a lasting impact on my research life.”
— Rob Ramsay (ASMR President 2000)

“Cath’s business insight and dedicated professionalism has guided the Board through some of it’s most important challenges. Her political nous and her ability to develop political aptitude in others has been a great contributor to the Society’s credibility as the key advocate for the medical research community. I am grateful for Cath’s guidance during my years on the Board and her lasting friendship.”
— Peter O’Loughlin (ASMR President 2001)

“Cath always had her eye on the tasks at hand for ASMR. I recall after my very first board meeting, we were travelling home and I mentioned that I had secretarial support at work. I could see her making a mental note about future jobs. That’s Cath, always looking out for ASMR.”
— Peter Schofield (ASMR President 2002)

“I’ve always considered Cath the font of all ASMR’s corporate wisdom.”
— Andrew Sinclair (ASMR President 2004)
How to give the early career researchers a fighting chance

After many years in North America, I moved back to Europe in 2003 to start a new institute of the Academy of Science in Vienna called IMBA (The Institute of Molecular Biotechnology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences). The challenge was how to develop a new research institute that is indeed competitive at the international level. Such visions are largely lifeless until people give it muscle, brains, a circulatory system and, most importantly courage and heart. But how, besides our coffee houses and cakes, does one convince the best young scientists to come to a new institute in Vienna? How could we establish and run an institute that can indeed compete against the best research universities in the world, many of which have much more money? Or in terms of sports teams, how can we develop a team that can play in the Champions-league of research for a long time?

Our answer was to try to set up a place, where the best scientists can follow their visions with the outmost financial and academic freedom, irrespective of any politics. Since there are many clever scientists and in many cases research success is also driven by access to new technologies, we created an academic and technological candy store where young researchers can succeed. This means free access to central infrastructure which allows scientists to work immediately and without limitations and allows the institute to retain key technologies even if certain scientists might leave again. Such central infrastructures also allow researchers to “jump” technologies and model systems and to perform experiments that otherwise would never have been possible due to costs or limitations in technical know-how.

Scientific excellence and world-renowned research centers are not defined by the quantities of publication but by the promotion of the best scientists and some key breakthroughs that can change scientific thinking. Thus, we need to invest in the best minds and give them all the necessary freedom to have a fighting chance in a growingly competitive world of science. However, a pioneering spirit not only depends on WHAT is being investigated but on HOW research is done, the culture of an institute. Our culture is simple: to provide a place where the best ideas flourish and where the best scientists can use entirely novel approaches and hopefully break paradigms. The real delight for me is to observe how the young scientists have grown in their own careers and have started to publish outstanding research papers. Scientific collaboration and the joy to see others succeed are also much better models for modern research than fierce competition. To build a scientific career and a reputation in research is difficult enough — we might as well be nice to each other and respect each other’s accomplishments.

Research and innovation have always been the driving force of new industries and therefore future jobs and wealth. Governments and by extension research institutes and universities therefore must find a way to develop and retain the best talents. At the end of the day, I think it is rather simple. If I spend my time to find and develop young talents, I also need to provide them with the necessary means to succeed: to bet on fresh ideas, to provide early independence and thereby scientific glory to the young scientists, to give them affordable (and even better free if one can afford it) access to state-of-the art technologies, to have the patience to develop talents into world-class players, and most importantly to create a place where people and ideas are respected and where it is fun to work.

Josef Penninger
ASMR Medallist 2009

The ASMR Research Awards

Each award ($5000 international or $2000 domestic) will support a postgraduate student member of the Society 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.

Applicants for “The ASMR Research Awards” must have been members of the ASMR for at least 12 months immediately preceding the year in which the Award application is to be considered. Applicants must have conducted no more than 3 years active research post their highest degree (career interruptions will be considered). The Award must be taken up during the first 6 months of the following year. Application forms available from http://www.asmr.org.au/Researchfund.html
Outstanding medical researcher and paediatrician, Professor Melissa Wake, was awarded the 2009 Federal Health Minister’s Award for Excellence in Health and Medical Research — recognising her landmark work to solve common child health problems. Presented at the Australian Society for Medical Research Week® dinner on June 4, the prestigious national award recognises outstanding achievement and potential for future achievement by a young Australian researcher.

Professor Wake has spent her career focussing on finding practical clinical strategies to improve hearing, language and literacy, obesity and early mental health and behavioural problems in Australian children.

The $50,000 research grant and medal is in addition to two recent awards for Melissa. Last year, her team was recognised by the NHMRC for one of their publications for ongoing research into childhood obesity being considered among ‘10 of the best’. Melissa also received an NHMRC excellence award for Most Outstanding Career Development for her research, which aims to find sustainable clinical solutions for common child health problems.

Her achievements in Victoria have been considerable and include the development of practical tools and resources for Victorian maternal and child health nurses to assist in the detection of obesity in toddlers and preschoolers.

Professor Wake is assisted by a supportive team at the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne — where she is a fantastic role model who has attracted exceptional young researchers to children’s population health. She also has affiliations with the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and The University of Melbourne.

**Harmonisation of Multi-centre Ethical Review (HoMER)**

Many human health and medical research projects are undertaken cooperatively by more than one research centre across multiple sites. The multi-centred, multi-sited approach has created a situation whereby research projects are regularly subjected to multiple reviews and approvals from numerous Human Review Ethics Committees (HRECs). Anecdotal evidence suggests that multiple ethical reviews delays the commencement of research and has contributed to additional research costs for investigators, institutions, industry and government.

The objective of the Harmonisation of Multi-centre Ethical Review (HoMER being conducted by NHMRC) project is to establish a national approach enabling the recognition of a single scientific and ethical review of multi-centre health and medical research within and/or across Australian jurisdictions.

The proposed model is designed to deliver three key outcomes:

- Trust-building between institutions and their HRECs
- Information sharing to enable single ethical review within and/or across jurisdictions
- A better understanding of the ethical review of multi-centre research.

The project’s objectives will be achieved through institutional and government adoption of agreed uncommon policies, processes and standardised forms. These tools will also include guidance on best practice research governance, agreed roles and responsibilities and certification of institutional ethical review processes.

The tools developed for the national approach can be integrated into existing and planned jurisdictional systems for streamlined ethical review and will be made accessible to all investigators at all institutions (including universities, medical research institutes, private hospitals and public health organisations) through a web-based information portal.

If you would like to register your interest to receive further project updates, please send your contact details to homer@nhmrc.gov.au

Further information on the HoMER project may be found at: [http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health_ethics/homer/index.htm](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health_ethics/homer/index.htm)
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Dr Alison Butt — President-elect and Honorary Treasurer
Dr Emma Parkinson-Lawrence — Honorary Secretary and Career Development
Dr Kristen Nowak — Media Director

Directors
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Vic Convenor — Dr Ayan Dasvarma
WA Convenor — Dr Shelley Gorman

Contact details from www.asmr.org.au/Statebranch.html

Mark your calendars now!
2010 AH&MRC will be held at the new Melbourne Exhibition & Convention Centre from 14–19 November, 2010

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Australasian Society for Psychiatric Research
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Australian and New Zealand Society for Blood Transfusion
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