

Audit of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) Administration

The MRFF is intended to be an integral part of the Australian health and medical research landscape, primarily supporting clinical and translational research.

Since its inception in 2014 it has been apparent that its disbursement processes are flawed. Australian researchers and clinicians have expressed concerns about the lack of transparency for funding calls, how funding is allocated and how the peer review process is applied.

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR), while applauding this government initiative, has been advocating for greater transparency and improved governance since contributing to the Senate Inquiry into the *Medical Research Future Fund Bill 2015*, where we recommended that all MRFF investment should be peer-reviewed.

Key concerns exist around -

- Several disbursements across various funding initiatives have been made without an open call for applications, clearly defined grant criteria and/or expert review. Data tabled for Estimates¹ on 4/3/2020 showed that 65% of all MRFF funding disbursed up to 31/1/2020, was not subject to a competitive process.
- In the case of grant schemes where peer review has been a part of the process and recommendations ignored or over-ridden by the Minister, the integrity of the Fund must be safeguarded by a justification from the Minister of the day.
- Some funding calls have turnaround times as short as 2 weeks. While this might occasionally be justified (e.g. bushfire research, support for coronavirus research), it should not be adopted as a norm, as it favours individual researchers or groups of scientists who may have prior knowledge of the call.

The Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit² has asked the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) to consider auditing the administration of the MRFF, as published in the annual audit work program³. It is understood that the audit will assess the effectiveness of the administration of the MRFF to date and examine the funding principles, strategy and priorities used to guide the selection of research initiatives to fund, governance structures and the mechanisms for monitoring and measuring the achievement of goals.

Speaking in Melbourne today, ASMR President, Associate Professor Christoph Hagemeyer said, *"The ASMR has written to the ANAO⁴ strongly recommending that the planned audit of the MRFF is conducted and we are urging the sector to do the same. With sufficient public pressure, we are confident that the audit will go ahead and the transparency and governance mechanisms can be improved for the benefit of the health and medical research sector and the health of the nation"*.

Associate Professor Hagemeyer went on to say, *"We believe that the best research and, consequently, the best health and economic outcomes, are underpinned by independent, transparent and expert review, rather than disbursements motivated by reasons other than scientific excellence."*

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¹<https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/Estimates/ca/add1920/TabledDoc6.pdf>

²https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Public_Accounts_and_Audit

³<https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/administration-the-medical-research-future-fund>

⁴<https://asmr.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MRFF-Audit-letter-online.pdf>