

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Inquiry into Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Spoken Question on Notice, 28 January 2021

PDR Number: IQ21-000009

Details of MRFF grant to University of Queensland

Spoken

Hansard Page number: 29

Senator: Rex Patrick

Question:

Senator PATRICK: Again, I'll go back to the MRFF report that gave rise to the initial grant. Is that report public?

Dr Murphy: The MRFF funded an approach—

Ms Edwards: There was \$5 million provided from the MRFF to the University of Queensland for vaccine research. It wasn't the only grant out of the MRFF. Among others, there was \$1 million provided to Vaxine Pty Ltd to progress COVAX-19. We can come on notice to you with all the information we would normally provide about MRFF grants. There would be some detail there. I have to say that we are comfortable that our vaccine research portfolio was appropriate. We always knew some things would work and some wouldn't. That's the nature of research, particularly in this sort of circumstance.

Senator PATRICK: Sure, but it goes to the facts that I laid on the table at the start—that CSIRO had already done some work on this and the COVAX vaccine had shown greater efficacy in relation to ferrets than the UQ vaccine. I'm asking if can you provide the committee with the analysis that was carried out by the MRFF in respect of those vaccines. I'd also like to know: Who did the analysis? Who were the people on the panel? It's been put to me that some of those people have connections with UQ, and there may have been a conflict of interest involved in respect of the choice.

Dr Murphy: The MRFF did not evaluate any vaccines; the MRFF is a research-funding source. The MRFF would evaluate applications and award funding to promising people, including the COVAX-19 vaccine and including the UQ vaccine.

Senator PATRICK: It's that analysis I'm interested in.

Dr Murphy: That was not an analysis in relation to the efficacy or otherwise of these vaccines; it was an analysis of the suitability for research funding.

Answer:

Successful applicants to Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) grant opportunities are determined through rigorous review processes by an independent Grant Assessment Committee. For each Grant Opportunity, the Grant Assessment Committee assesses eligible applications against the selection criteria, as outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. All funding decisions are made in adherence to the *Medical Research Future Fund Act 2015* and, as relevant, the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*. Conflicts of interest of Grant Assessment Committee members are managed by the relevant Grants Administration Hub.

Through the MRFF, The University of Queensland (UQ) received \$5 million for research projects aimed at developing a vaccine for COVID-19.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is the Grants Administration Hub that established and manages the COVID-19 vaccine research grants, including those to The University of Queensland, on behalf of the Department of Health. This included selecting appropriate experts for the Grant Assessment Committee. To protect the integrity of the assessment process, information about the assessment of individual grants and the outcomes of each assessment made by Grant Assessment Committees is confidential.

Consistent with NHMRC's policy on the disclosure of interests requirements, members of the Grant Assessment Committees for both Grant Opportunities provided declarations of interests both before assessing grant applications, and at the grant assessment meetings. Where a conflict of interest is declared, it is managed in accordance with the NHMRC's policy.

No member participated in the assessment of the grant application if they were precluded from doing so under the NHMRC's policy.

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Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Inquiry into Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Spoken Question on Notice, 28 January 2021

PDR Number: IQ21-000011

Process information and members of the panel that made the decision of MRFF grant to the University of Queensland

Spoken

Hansard Page number: 29

Senator: Rex Patrick

Question:

Ms Edwards: but just to note: it's not only the \$5 million to the University of Queensland or the \$1 million I mentioned to you; there was \$96 million all up for research into COVID-19 and there were a range of vaccine candidates. That would be our usual approach. I can assure you that—

Senator PATRICK: I'm talking about the—

Ms Edwards: the usual rigor to which we put into grant processes has applied to this one. We're not aware of any conflict of interest; they're dealt with very carefully. If you have any information, we would be happy to follow it up, because that's certainly not any concern which has been raised.

Senator PATRICK: If you can provide me with the panel that made the decision—

Ms Edwards: We'll provide you with the process information.

Senator PATRICK: It was around about February until it was made on the first grant.

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