

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

28 January 2021

PDR Number: IQ21-000103

Details of MRFF grant to University of Queensland - Updated response

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:

This is an updated answer to IQ21-000009.

Grant funding to the University of Queensland

The \$5 million in grant funding awarded to the University of Queensland for COVID-19 Vaccine Research was provided via two grant opportunities.

Grant Assessment Committees

Membership comprised international and Australian-based members from various states and institutions. The gender balance for the committees was 57 per cent male/43 per cent female.

Grant Assessors	
Organisation	Expertise
Industry	Academic expertise in immunology, virology and vaccines. Industry experience in vaccine development and commercialisation.
Industry	Clinical qualifications and expertise including clinical trials. Industry experience in vaccine research and development in Australia and overseas.
Not-for-profit	Consumer Advisor with expertise in immunisation.
Not-for-profit	Expertise in vaccine commercialisation and intellectual property through previous roles at major international pharmaceutical companies. Serves on international vaccine advisory committees.
University	Expertise in public health, ethics, Indigenous health as well as health services delivery and implementation, including vaccination policy and programs.
University	Basic scientist with expertise in virology, vaccine development, drug design and antivirals and animal models.
University	A physician and epidemiologist with experience in infectious diseases and vaccine programs, especially for high-risk populations.
Industry	Leadership role at an international biotechnology company developing vaccines against emerging infectious diseases. Expertise in clinical trials, research translation and vaccine development.
Industry	Expertise in health innovation, commercialisation and intellectual property.
University	Paediatrician and immunologist/microbiologist with expertise in virology and the pathogenesis of coronavirus infections.
University	Independent Chair

Grant Assessors	
Organisation	Expertise
Government	Molecular biology, proteomics, gene expression, cardiovascular, management of research funding programs
Government	Biochemistry, epigenetics, management of research funding programs
Government	Research management and governance, reproductive medicine, general experience in immunology and inflammation

The individuals involved in assessing the grants were appropriately qualified and, where conflicts of interest were identified, they were managed in accordance with standard NHMRC processes. Further information about the grant assessors is set out in the table at **Attachment A**. This table is provided in camera and should not be published or circulated beyond the confidential committee arrangements.

Analysis and assessment of the applications for the grant awarded to the University of Queensland were undertaken by the grant assessors.

De-identified scores from the assessment are provided at **Attachment B**, noting that the University of Queensland was the highest ranked application through this grant opportunity.

Disclosure and management of interests

As a standard part of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grant assessment processes, members of Grant Assessment Committees are required to provide declarations of interests before assessing grant applications, again at the grant assessment meetings and at any stage during assessment if a potential conflict of interest becomes apparent. This required applies whether the assessment relates to the NHMRC's role as a Grants Hub for MRFF or in administering its own grants.

Conflicts of interest are managed in accordance with the *NHMRC Policy on the Disclosure of Interests Requirements for Prospective and Appointed NHMRC Committee Members*.

In total for the relevant grant opportunity, 11 conflicts were declared against the applications considered by the grant assessors.

For the University of Queensland application, three members declared a conflict of interest. In accordance with NHMRC's policy and process for managing disclosure of interests, those members were precluded from assessing that application and were absent from all committee discussion of the application.

The NHMRC expects peer reviewers to exemplify integrity in all involvement with the peer-review process, and to act in good faith in the best interests of NHMRC and the research community. This includes, but is not limited to, the maintenance of absolute confidentiality and thus abstaining from improper use of their involvement (or information obtained from their involvement) to gain an advantage for themselves or any person, or to cause detriment to NHMRC.

NHMRC requires peer reviewers to adhere to the principles and practices outlined in *Peer Review: a guide supporting the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*. Researchers breach the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research by *'failing to conduct peer review responsibly and fairly'* or *'failing to disclose relevant interests'* (section five).

In 2020, for NHMRC's two largest schemes, NHMRC drew on assessments from more than 900 expert peer reviewers. For the Ideas Grant scheme, reviewers provided 11,954 separate assessments for the almost 3,000 applications.

MRFF Novel Coronavirus Vaccine Development Grant Opportunity Outcomes

APP ID	Chief Investigator	Title	Final Score	Category	Value and Risk	Administering Institution	Budget	Cumulative Budget
		Molecular Clamp Stabilized Spike Vaccine for Rapid Response	6.583	7	Excellent	The University of Queensland		
			6.113	6	Excellent			
			6.056	6	Excellent			
			5.267	5	Good			
			5.233	5	Good			
			5.156	5	Good			
			4.213	4	Marginal			
			4.133	4	Marginal			
			4.122	4	Good			
			3.567	4	Marginal			

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