



Australian Government
National Health and Medical Research Council



2 November 2020

Ms Lyn Beverley
Committee Secretary
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee
Via email: fadt@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Beverley

Thank you for your letter of 20 October 2020 about the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee's (the Committee) current inquiry into the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention Bill 2020 and the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2020.

I am responding to comments made to the Committee about NHMRC in the submission from Mr Stuart McCarthy, which you included with your letter. I agree to this letter being published.

I categorically refute the assertion made by Mr McCarthy that NHMRC is a corrupt institution.

On page 14 of his submission, Mr McCarthy quotes the response of a former employee of NHMRC, Dr Tony Willis, to the Senate Inquiry into the use of the Quinoline anti-malarial drugs (Mefloquine and Tafenoquine) in the Australian Defence Force in 2018. Dr Willis's response outlined that NHMRC develops national guidance on the role of ethics committees¹, but does not have any role in advising on decisions made by them. Ethics committees in Australia are the responsibility of the institution under which they are established. I can confirm that the evidence provided by Dr Willis at that time was correct and remains the case.

Mr McCarthy suggests that there is a link between Dr Willis's appearance at the Senate Inquiry and the appointment of Ms Jennifer Herz to NHMRC's Health Innovation Advisory Committee (HIAC) three weeks later. Ms Herz is also a member of the Expert Reference Group for the APPRISE Centre for Research Excellence – the NHMRC-funded Australian Partnership for Preparedness Research on Infectious Disease Emergencies. Mr McCarthy implies that, as Ms Herz is a director of 60 Degrees Pharmaceuticals and a co-owner of Bioclect – the Australian distributor of Kodatof (tafenoquine for malaria prophylaxis), it is inappropriate for her to be a member of NHMRC's HIAC, and that her involvement with APPRISE gives her undue influence on Australia's infectious disease policy including NHMRC funding decisions.

There is no link between the appointment of Ms Herz to HIAC and the appearance of NHMRC at the Senate Inquiry into the use of Quinoline anti-malarial drugs in the Australian Defence Force. For the information of the Committee, NHMRC has no role in approving the use of drugs by the Australian Defence Force. It is spurious for the NHMRC's appearance at the Senate Inquiry to be linked to Ms Herz's appointment in any way.

Members are appointed by the Commonwealth Minister for Health to NHMRC principal committees, such as HIAC, based on their expertise, experience and collective capacity to present a diversity of perspectives on the issues under consideration. The role of committee members is to provide advice to the Council of NHMRC and myself on matters within NHMRC's remit. In the case of HIAC, that advice pertains to NHMRC's strategies to foster the development, commercialisation and uptake of innovative technologies and practices arising from health and medical research. HIAC does not make decisions and does not advise on the use of any drugs in medical research or clinical care.²

¹ <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018>

² <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/innovation/health-innovation-advisory-committee>

Noting the expertise that members of all NHMRC committees bring to their roles, NHMRC has a comprehensive process for managing perceived or possible conflicts of interests of its committee members.³ As part of this process, Ms Herz provided an initial declaration of interests, which she regularly reviews and updates as needed. Like all appointees, a summary of her declared interests is available publically on NHMRC's website.⁴

APPRISE was awarded a 5-year NHMRC grant from 2016 through a competitive process to establish a national Centre of Research Excellence in pandemic preparedness research. Its role is to undertake infectious disease emergency response research in the Australian health system – as it has during the COVID-19 pandemic since January 2020. APPRISE was not established for the specific purpose of influencing government infectious disease policy nor does it play any role in NHMRC funding decisions.

With respect to Ms Herz's membership of the APPRISE Expert Reference Group (ERG), NHMRC has no involvement in the selection of members for this group. Members of the ERG are all experts in fields related to APPRISE research and contribute their expertise in an unpaid capacity. APPRISE has selected people from across various areas in government, medicine and the private sector to give advice and feedback on the APPRISE research program.

NHMRC is not a corrupt institution. As set out in Annual Reports tabled in the Australian Parliament, our role is to fund health and medical research and training, issue guidelines and advice on improving health outcomes, and set national standards for the ethical conduct and integrity of research. NHMRC complies with all relevant legislation and policy, both in practice and in spirit. As a government agency subject to regular public scrutiny, NHMRC has served the Australian community effectively and honourably for more than 80 years.

Yours sincerely

Professor Anne Kelso AO
Chief Executive Officer

³ <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/leadership-and-governance/committees>

⁴ <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/leadership-and-governance/committees/health-innovation-advisory-committee-2018-2021>