



Deakin University Submission

Senate Inquiry into the Medical Research Future Fund Consequential Amendments Bill (2015)

July 9, 2015

Deakin University is pleased to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into the Medical Research Future Fund Consequential Amendments Bill (2015).

Deakin has an extensive health and medical research profile with a focus on multidisciplinary, translational and preventative health research. The University has a strong interest in research that improves the health and wellbeing of regional Australians. We have recently formed the Western Alliance Academic Health Science Centre, a research partnership between the University and all of the public and private hospitals and primary care peak bodies across Western Victoria. Growth in health and medical research activity has been reflected in a strong performance in Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) 2012 (a rating of 5 (above world standard) for medical and health sciences) and the University's rise in international rankings - in the top 3% in all three major ranking systems in 2015.

Deakin strongly supports the establishment of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) to expand health and medical research. The new fund should significantly enhance Australia's health and medical research output, providing tangible health benefits to the Australian population and commercial opportunities arising from Australia's internationally competitive research sector.

We believe that the impact of the MRFF on the health of Australians will be optimised if funding is guided by a strategy based on national health priorities. We support the amendments establishing an independent expert Australian Medical Research Advisory Board charged with developing an Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy and Australian Medical Research and Innovation Priorities. We would suggest that establishment of the MRFF is an opportunity to ensure funding for two relatively neglected areas of research; public health research and translational research (research into implementation of established research findings into standard clinical practice). As outlined in the 2013 Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research (the McKeon Report), there is potential for major health benefits for relatively limited cost through investment in both of these areas.

Commercialization of research findings will clearly be a priority for the MRFF. Despite a very strong research track record, Australia has not performed well in translating research findings into commercial returns. The MRFF provides an opportunity to develop strong incentives for universities and industry partners to work together to improve commercial outcomes. It will be important to recognize the high failure rate of start-up companies and build this into funding policies.

Implementation Issues

Deakin supports a rigorous, peer reviewed, competitive funding application process within identified national health priority areas. Coordination of research priorities and funding programs between National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Australian Research Council (ARC) and MRFF will be critical to fully realise the potential of the MRFF. It will be particularly important to clarify funding priorities for the NHMRC and the MRFF and to develop application processes that are complementary to avoid overlap and duplication.

The proposed Advisory Board is strongly supported, as is the role of the NHMRC CEO on the Board. Inclusion of individuals with experience in commercialisation of research findings will also be important. Deakin supports a whole-of-government approach to health research to ensure that resources are directed to national health priorities. We would suggest representation of the Commonwealth Departments of Health, Education and Training and Industry and Science on the Advisory Board, as well as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which is currently conducting an Australian burden of disease study, due for publication in 2016.

It is widely recognized that the cost of research infrastructure is not adequately supported by current competitive grant schemes. The benefits of new funds for research through the MRFF will not be fully realised if there is no recognition of the additional infrastructure costs that will arise from this funding. Deakin strongly supports a more realistic and coordinated approach to research infrastructure across all research funding programs.

Additional research activity funded through the MRFF will also lead to increased numbers of health students and early career health practitioners undertaking higher degrees by research in clinical, public health and laboratory-based disciplines. If Australia is to develop a research led healthcare system and research intensive commercial health industries there will need to be appropriate career pathways into universities, the healthcare sector and industry for students and practitioners in medicine, nursing, public health, allied health and laboratory sciences. Deakin suggests that development of these career pathways should be included in the Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy to be developed by the Advisory Board.

Deakin will be pleased to provide more information on request.

Professor Jane den Hollander
Vice-Chancellor