Australian Government

National Health and Medical Research Council

NHMRC Submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities

June 2008

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1. Executive Summary

1. National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) notes that in reaching for world class standards in healthcare delivery, the translation of health and medical research from basic science through to the clinic and the delivery of healthcare is vitally important. This translation of evidence into practice is an issue faced by most research sectors.

2. In order to be effective in undertaking and leading the uptake and implementation of research findings, clinicians and healthcare professionals need to be research literate and research savvy. Research and research training should be incorporated into the curricula of all health professional training programs through universities.

3. NHMRC acknowledges that there are complex inter-relationships between universities, healthcare settings, medical research institutes (MRI) and industry in training healthcare professionals. With universities almost universally regarded as the breeding ground for researchers, NHMRC is conscious that they also compete with MRI, industry, and hospitals in attracting and retaining staff, and the differences in salary regulation across the sectors has an impact on career progression and retention of researchers.

4. NHMRC is in the process of engaging a consultant to prepare a Workforce Demographic Report on the health and medical research (HMR) workforce in Australia. This report is expected by the end of 2008.

5. In order to remain competitive and improve Australia's world-class research, NHMRC is focused on the translation of research and knowledge into tangible outcomes. Effective knowledge transfer strategies rely on the capacity of higher education and research institutions to shape their knowledge transfer approaches and activities in partnership with their various communities, and to respond creatively to the distinctive needs of those communities.

6. NHMRC is committed to improving researcher access to education and skills development across the health and medical research sectors as a platform for productivity growth and workforce transformation.

2. Role of the NHMRC

The NHMRC appreciates the opportunity to respond to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Research Training and the Research Workforce in Australian Universities.

NHMRC is Australia's principal agency for funding fundamental and applied health and medical research; for developing health advice for the Australian community, health professionals and governments; and for providing advice on ethical behaviour in healthcare and in the conduct of health and medical research.

Under the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992* (the Act) one of the objectives of NHMRC is to ***foster medical research and training and public health research and training throughout Australia***.

By funding grants for research activities as well as for building research capacity, NHMRC is committed to building Australia's competitiveness in health and medical research. NHMRC supports investigator initiated research across all health and medical disciplines, provides funding based on peer review and on research excellence and capacity to deliver outcomes, and initiates major research efforts in the areas of greater health burden to Australians. **Appendix A** provides an outline of the range of funding schemes to support research activity and build capacity for Australian researchers.

3. Research is a vital component of clinical health care delivery.

In reaching for world class standards in healthcare delivery, the translation of health and medical research from basic science through to the clinic and the delivery of healthcare is vitally important.

NHMRC recognises the need for clinicians and healthcare professionals to be research literate and research savvy in order to effectively implement health policy and deliver evidence-based interventions in healthcare settings, with the ultimate goal of improving the health of the community and the delivery of healthcare. Refer to **Appendix B "**The Virtuous Cycle".

NHMRC is seeking to improve undergraduate and post-graduate training opportunities and will encourage the incorporation of research and research training into the curricula of all health professional training programs through universities. NHMRC is also considering more targeted scholarships, particularly in rural Australia and in the area of indigenous health.

The selection and support of the best and most talented researchers is paramount to the success of Australia's health and medical research sector. Through prestigious and highly competitive fellowship and scholarship programs NHMRC aims to support early, mid and senior researchers. Specific initiatives to stimulate knowledge transfer include new partnership arrangements to better link research with the users of knowledge generated by research.

NHMRC acknowledges that there are complex inter-relationships between universities, healthcare settings, medical research institutes and industry in training healthcare professionals.

Whilst universities are the breeding ground for the development of researchers, universities are also competing with medical research institutes (MRI), industry and hospitals in

attracting and retaining staff. There is competition between these organisations in a limited labour market, and perceived disparity between the costs of funding research and the salaries provided.

Researcher salaries are regulated in the university and public hospital settings. However they are not regulated in industry or medical research institutes, and this disparity may affect onward employment and career progression and retention of researchers. NHMRC is also aware of concerns that research funding does not currently cover the full costs of researcher salaries, as seen in the gap between NHMRC funding and existing salary structures within the sector. This is particularly relevant when researchers are able to attract significantly higher remuneration packages overseas.

4. Challenges to the health and medical research sector

NHMRC appreciates the challenges faced by universities and other institutions in training, recruiting and retaining high quality research staff. NHMRC has an important role in developing a world class health and medical research workforce and meeting their current and future needs.

NHMRC is in the process of engaging a consultant to prepare a Workforce Demographic Report on the health and medical research (HMR) workforce in Australia. The report, due in late 2008, will aim to identify trends and factors impacting on the structure and needs of the health and medical research workforce.

NHMRC's vertical integration within the healthcare system ensures comprehensive support for health system innovation. In ensuring that it meets the challenge of supporting the best and most effective health and medical research, NHMRC undertakes ongoing and direct interaction with all elements of the health system. This includes its close association with agencies within the Commonwealth Health and Ageing portfolio, state and territory health departments, professional medical colleges and societies, the community, non-government health research organisations (e.g. health consumer and patient advocacy groups), and researchers in universities, hospitals and medical research institutes.

NHMRC is committed to improving researcher access to education and skills development as a platform for productivity growth and workforce transformation. NHMRC supports the health and medical research workforce through its people support programs, for example the Practitioner Fellowships and Centres of Clinical Research Excellence provide support for researchers and capacity building in hospitals.

While the process of synthesising and disseminating the outcomes of health and medical research to inform health policy and practice may seem straight forward, commissioning the best and most relevant research is the beginning of a journey which may take many years to complete[1]. Moreover, effective knowledge transfer strategies rely on the capacity

[1] Balas, E. A., & Boren, S. A. (2000). Managing clinical knowledge for health care improvement. *Yearbook of Medical Informatics.*

of higher education and research institutions to shape their knowledge transfer approaches and activities in partnership with their various communities, and to respond creatively to the distinctive needs of those communities.

NHMRC funding schemes aim to increases researcher access to skills and knowledge provided by industry, and helps to bridge the gap between industry and researchers. This is highlighted by NHMRC Industry Career Development Awards and the Development Grant Scheme (see www.nhmrc.gov.au for more information on these schemes). Such schemes also enhance the capacity for the creation of new career paths, new ways of working collaboratively, growing the economy, building a more competitive Australia, and increasing the knowledge of the health workforce[2].

NHMRC will continue to develop innovative long-term solutions to challenges faced by Australia's health and medical workforce and to bridge the gap between industry and research.

[2] Australia's Health Workforce, Productivity Commission Research Report, (2005).

5. Appendix A: NHMRC Funding Schemes

NHMRC provides the following support for research activities and building capacity for Australia's health and medical researchers.

Support for research activities includes the following schemes:

- *Project Grants* enable individual researchers or a group of researchers to undertake scientific investigation in the biomedical, clinical, public health or health services field. Project grants target a specific hypothesis or question(s) and are awarded on the basis of significance, relevance, science, and track record;
- *Program Grants* support teams of researchers to pursue broadly based collaborative research activities. These are awarded on the basis of recent record of achievement in research and research translation;
- *Strategic awards* provide NHMRC with a mechanism to respond to opportunities for pursuing innovative projects and national and international collaborations at the frontiers of health and medical research. Recent examples include palliative care, potential avian influenza-induced pandemic, preventive healthcare, and Type 1 diabetes.

NHMRC's support for Australia's researchers includes the following schemes:

- *NHMRC Research Fellowships* provide support for internationally competitive Australian researchers to undertake research that is both of major importance in its field and of benefit to Australian health;
- *Australia Fellowships* aims to attract and retain leading health and medical researchers all disciplines;
- *National Institute of Clinical Studies (NICS) Fellowships* offer a unique opportunity to talented early to mid-career health professionals to be trained in the science of evidence implementation;
- *Practitioner Fellowships* is a targeted award intended to assist experienced and productive clinical and public health researchers who wish to maintain both a research and a professional career. The scheme aims to support clinical (medical, paramedical, allied health) and public health professionals who have undertaken a successful research program and wish to continue at nationally or internationally competitive levels;
- *Training (Postdoctoral) Fellowships* provide opportunities for early career Australian researchers to undertake research that is both of major importance in its field and of benefit to Australian health;
- *Career Development Awards* support middle career researchers build Australia's health research skills, increase knowledge, and encourage the growth of knowledge-based industries in Australia;

- *Travelling Award for Research Training* has been established to enable current holders of NHMRC Australian-based Fellowships and Scholarships to value add to their research by providing funding for limited training periods at a temporary host institution;
- *Capacity Building Grants in Population Health and Health Services Research* provide support to develop capacity within teams of population health and/or health services researchers by funding new expertise and developing less experienced researchers to become research leaders;
- *Scholarships* scheme provide support for PhD students groups not normally supported by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR);

Examples of NHMRC's role in attracting and supporting international collaboration in research are:

- The Australia-China Exchange Fellowships, which aim to increase collaboration between Australian and Chinese health and medical researchers by supporting exchange between the two countries.

- The Australia Fellowships, which aim to attract and retain leading health and medical researchers. It is designed for outstanding senior health and medical researchers across all disciplines. Its objectives are to:
  - increase Australia's capacity for outstanding health and medical research at the highest competitive level internationally;
  - encourage high calibre Australian researchers to continue their work in Australia;
  - attract outstanding Australian researchers currently based overseas;
  - attract leading international researchers to Australia, to benefit Australia through outstanding contributions to knowledge in health;
  - further support the internationalisation of Australian health and medical research through enhancement of networks between the Australian and international research communities;
  - enhance the reputation of Australia as a place of excellence in health and medical research;
  - support the development of better health practice and policy, and the development of innovative industries in Australia; and
  - support the training of future health and medical researchers in intellectually stimulating environments.

6. Appendix B: The Virtuous Cycle

The 'Virtuous Cycle' characterises a series of mutually reinforcing transitions between knowledge produced from research, and improvements in national health and wealth. This cycle highlights the complementary roles of funding, discovery, and delivery.