

**NHMRC RESPONSE TO SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES  
COMMITTEE REPORT *THE CANCER JOURNEY: INFORMING CHOICE*,  
JUNE 2005**

**Recommendation 22**

The Committee recommends the National Health and Medical Research Council provide a dedicated funding stream for research into complementary therapies and medicines, to be allocated on a competitive basis.

*NHMRC response*

The NHMRC considers that funding of research into complementary therapies and medicines, like the funding of other health and medical research, must be on the basis of excellence as assessed by peer review. Any funding for research outside of existing schemes, such as Project Grants, would need to be based on identified need and met from external sources.

**Recommendation 23**

The Committee agrees with the recommendation of the Expert Committee on complementary medicines in the health system, that the NHMRC convene an expert working group to identify the research needs addressing the use of complementary medicines, including issues around safety, efficacy and capacity building. The Committee recommends that this working group should include complementary therapists in order to develop a strategy to coordinate and prioritise a dedicated research funding stream for complementary medicine and therapy research, taking into account research conducted overseas. The group should also encourage the development of collaborative partnerships across disciplines.

*NHMRC response*

The NHMRC reiterates the Government response to the Expert Committee on Complementary Medicines. The NHMRC agrees that it is important to identify research needs and priorities in relation to complementary medicines to ensure that public funding is used effectively. The need for priority research into complementary therapies and medicines has not been identified through the NHMRC's priority setting processes to date. The NHMRC will therefore consult with the Department of Health and Ageing, the Therapeutic Goods Administration and other stakeholders to determine the most appropriate means of identifying and supporting any research needs consistent with the National Medicines Policy and the national strategy for quality use of medicines.

**Recommendation 24**

The Committee recommends that the NHMRC develop workshops for complementary therapy researchers intending to compete for funding, where experienced researchers discuss their preparation of research proposals.

*NHMRC response*

The NHMRC has, from time to time, held workshops to assist researchers in better understanding the grant application and assessment process and would consider doing so for researchers in the complementary healthcare sector should resources for this purpose be made available.

**Recommendation 25**

The Committee recommends that the NHMRC appoint two representatives, (including one consumer), with a background in complementary therapy, to be involved in the assessment of research applications received by the NHMRC for research into complementary and alternative treatments.

*NHMRC response*

All grant applications received by the NHMRC are subject to peer review. Members of Grant Review Panels (GRPs) will normally hold, or have recently held, a research grant obtained through a nationally or internationally competitive peer review process. Usually members will not be appointed for more than three years.

The NHMRC is always keen to expand the pool of reviewers and would welcome nominations from appropriately qualified individuals to sit on its GRPs.

In this context, the NHMRC is pleased to advise that peer review processes are currently being revised and by 2007 it is envisaged a significantly increased pool of reviewers will be used to assess grants. A copy of a press release outlining the broad thrust of the changes is attached.



INVESTING IN AUSTRALIA'S HEALTH

MEDIA RELEASE

11 September 2005

***ACCELERATING THE PACE OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH***

Faster funding approvals and a better fit with community needs and national health priorities have been promised today by the nation's premier health and medical research body.

The National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) CEO, Professor Alan Pettigrew says that other benefits include "simpler and more responsive processes for allocating research funds, improved feedback, and less red tape".

The announcement follows last week's statement by Health Minister Tony Abbott that the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) will become a fully independent statutory agency.

Chair of the Research Committee, Professor Judith Black said "along with efficiencies, the NHMRC was working toward better alignment of research grants with national health and research priorities, without abandoning the innovations that typically come from fundamental scientific research".

"The community has a right to expect that Government money applied to health and medical research will be used to improve their future health and will guide Government decisions on health expenditure. It is imperative that we align our research investment with the health needs of the community, and clearly convey to the community that research efforts and the resulting achievements mean benefits for all of us."

As of 2006, strategic groups known as "Health Streams" are to be established and organised according to major disease and population groups. Each Health Stream will have a broad membership of consumers, non-government organisations, policy makers, and researchers. They will be responsible for identifying the strengths and gaps within its area of responsibility and making recommendations on strategies required to ensure that there is appropriate capacity – whether people, funds or facilities – to best meet future challenges.

Each Health Stream will look at urgent and emerging health challenges; the needs of particular populations; the biomedical and basic science required to make advances in the health area; health improvements which could be achieved through clinical, health

services and policy research; and the potential use of informatics and genetics. In addition, the Health Streams will explore the potential for industry involvement in research and the opportunities for research to be commercialised.

“In addition to introducing mechanisms to align the research supported by Government through the NHMRC with the major health problems facing the community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, efficiencies will be realised through a variety of innovations” said Professor Black.

“By 2007 the number of application forms will be reduced to just one two-part internet-based form and grants will be streamlined to just four main types instead of 20. The formation of our review panels will also be streamlined: instead of appointing new panels every year we will be doing it once every three years, with more comprehensive feedback to applicants to guide researchers in their future grant applications.”

The introduction of its streamlined grants process has the potential to cut the time between grant applications and approvals in half, from around twelve months to six months.

Professor Pettigrew said that “the six-month turnaround would be standard once all elements of the new process were implemented by the end of 2007”.

“It’s a remarkable timeframe given that all grant applications are subject to a rigorous peer review process. The peer review process continues to be the gold standard in terms of ensuring the overall scientific merit of all applications, and the potential return to taxpayers and the nation.”

**To arrange interviews with Professors David Hill, Terry Nolan (Deputy Chairs NHMRC Research Committee), or Alan Pettigrew contact: John Rogers, NHMRC Communications Unit, 6289 9199.**

## ***ACCELERATING THE PACE OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH***

### ***BENEFITS FOR THE COMMUNITY***

- Deliver identifiable health outcomes.
- Improved flexibility to direct investment to priority areas.
- Increased information about health and medical research undertaken and the benefits accruing and what these mean for their own health.
- Enhanced links with patient and community groups.
- Link research to health advisory activities – transfer of research findings into practice.
- Body of experts from whom independent advice can be called.
- Ensure a rapid response to urgent and emerging areas of health and medical research.
- A clear research focus on the major causes of disease.

- Improved understanding of health needs: significance of specific problems and why disease burden persists.
- Reduce health inequalities.
- Strengthen health status of vulnerable population group(s).
- Enhanced understanding of health and medical research undertaken in national health priority areas.
- Reassurance that health and medical research investment has a defined long term goal and is funding world class, excellent research.

### ***BENEFITS FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS***

- Clearer picture of what NHMRC research means for their work.
- Clearer picture of how they might get involved in research.
- Better ability to explain research and its outcomes to their patients.

***BENEFITS FOR OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES  
(INCLUDING DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND AGEING)***

- Strategic analysis, priority setting and gap identification aligned with the burden of disease.
- Combine current priorities and additional major health issues, emerging issues, and opportunities to develop inter-disciplinary initiatives.
- Opportunity to establish research and research funding partnerships.
- Body of experts from whom independent advice can be called.
- Reduced duplication of effort.
- More responsiveness – “whole of Government” approach to research.

***BENEFITS FOR OTHER RESEARCH FUNDING  
ORGANISATIONS***

- Assist in strategic analysis, priority setting and gap identification.
- Body of experts from whom independent advice can be called.
- Opportunity to establish research and research funding partnerships.
- Reduced duplication of effort through better lines of communication.
- Combine current priorities and additional major health issues, emerging issues, and opportunities to develop inter-disciplinary initiatives.
- Opportunity to establish research and research funding partnerships.

## ***BENEFITS FOR RESEARCHERS***

- Build on existing competencies and strengths of existing research base.
- Scientific opportunity.
- Research strategy defined enabling researchers to target research.
- More effective and efficient allocation of research funds.
- Streamlining of funding schemes.
- Simplified funding schemes.
- Streamlined and generic application form and peer review processes.
- Multiple application rounds per year.
- Introduction of Expression of Interest stage wherever possible.
- Larger Grant Review Panels to ensure appropriate expertise to evaluate proposals.
- Grant Review Panels responsible for full assessment of research proposals.
- More comprehensive feedback to applicants.
- Opportunity to establish research and research funding partnerships.
- Longer-term funding for grants.
- Ensures high quality health and medical research continues to be funded by NHMRC.
- Identifies areas of research in need of development.
- Earlier notification of application outcome.

## ***BENEFITS FOR THE RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS***

- Streamlining of funding schemes.
- Earlier notification of application outcome.
- Simplifying funding schemes.
- Streamlined and generic application form and peer review processes.
- Reduced call on peer reviewers.
- Opportunity to establish research and research funding partnerships.
- Better and more timely feedback on research proposals.
- More even distribution of research administration workload throughout the year.
- Longer term funding for grants.