



University of
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McKeon Review Secretariat
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To whom it may concern

Submission to the Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia

I welcome the opportunity to make a brief submission to the Review of Health and Medical Research. I have been an active health researcher for over 30 years – most of that time supported by NHMRC with fellowships (early in my career) and grants. I am a strong supporter of NHMRC but do have some suggestions for the future.

1. It is imperative that NHMRC continue to be the major funding agency for health and medical research. I strongly oppose it being merged into ARC as I think over the long term that would lead to a weakening of health and medical research in Australia. NHMRC has a mandate beyond funding of health research, and provides a clear focal point to advocate for continuing strong support for health research.
2. NHMRC funds research across the spectrum of health from biomedical, through clinical, population health and policy and practice relevant to health. This latter point is very important as increasingly in preventive health it is recognized that many critical actions will need to take place in sectors outside the health system. Obesity is an excellent example: actions need to be taken in relation to the food supply, urban planning, sports and recreation, local government. This is an area that in my view NHMRC struggles with. It is a difficult area but must be addressed.
3. The Partnership Projects, and possibly the new Partnership Centres, could be potential solutions. However, ideally there should also be avenues through the Project Grant system as there are currently for large-scale clinical trials (see below).
4. Related to the above issue is intervention research in population health. NHMRC supports clinical intervention research well – including excellent processes for large-scale clinical trials. This includes a specialized panel to assess such applications. There needs to be a similar approach in relation to intervention research in public health. The large scale clinical trials include some public health trials in infectious disease control such as vaccinations and drug trials, however most of the major lifestyle-related public health problems contributing to the bulk of Australia's burden of preventable disease (including obesity, tobacco, alcohol, mental health) have not been adequately addressed within the current systems of assessment and funding.

Suggestions for improving the current processes include:

- a) Specialised panel(s) for the assessment of interventions in population health
- b) Longer-term funding contingent on the achievement of agreed milestones, as the current 5-year maximum is not sufficient to reach measurable outcomes in many instances

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- c) While lifestyle-related health problems impact across society, they generally impact more severely in disadvantaged populations, including Indigenous Australians, people with mental illness, refugees, and the homeless. It is therefore essential to build in processes that recognize the challenges of working with such population groups.

As well as my involvement in NHMRC committees and research and fellowship review panels over many years, I was recently appointed as a member of the Research Committee of the Australian National Preventive Health Agency. In 2011 ANPHA called for applications for funding for intervention research in relation to obesity and alcohol. They had a very small budget (\$4.7m) and received over 280 applications requesting almost \$1b. This highlighted to me the great reservoir of enthusiasm in the public health research community for research of this nature. However, I do not think it makes sense for this to be handled by an organization outside of NHMRC. The solution would be for more effective processes to be available within NHMRC – along the lines of the specialized review process for large-scale clinical trials.

I have prepared this submission in my capacity as a researcher. It reflects my personal views, not those of any national committees I currently am a member of.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kerin O'Dea". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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