



Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia. This submission is from the Australian College of Midwives, the peak professional organisation for midwives in Australia. Midwives are the largest provider of maternity services in Australia. There has been considerable interest in midwifery over the past 5 years culminating in the National Maternity Services Plan released by the Council of Australian Governments 12 months ago.

We address the questions as posed by the Strategic Review,

Why is it in Australia's interest to have a viable, internationally competitive health and medical research sector?

Research is an essential component of the provision of high quality health services in Australia and internationally. In our field particularly, research has made, and continues to make significant differences to the care that women and babies receive in their early life. A healthy start to life is a national health priority and hence research is one way to ensure that this will occur. Research in recent years has demonstrated the critical importance of a woman's health during pregnancy as this impacts on the long terms health of the baby, especially in terms of development og high blood pressure, diabetes and other health problems.

The use of evidence in practice is another reason why a viable, internationally competitive health and medical research sector is important. Too often, new technologies are implemented into health services without adequate evidence to support their routine use. This adds significant costs to the health budget and often has unintended consequences in terms of more interventions. This has been seen in maternity care and was detailed in the National Maternity Services Review (Commonwealth of Australia 2008; Commonwealth of Australia 2009) which was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government. Research into health services, health technologies and interventions is therefore highly important to ensure that the best health outcomes can be achieved.

How might health and medical research be best managed and funded in Australia?

A range of funding options are needed that reflect the diversity of research and the research workforce. Currently there are so few opportunities especially for health services research and in hospitals, non-medical research.

Currently there are essentially 2 national competitive agencies with very few other opportunities for health services research and for non-medical research. A broader perspective on health, health services, translation in practice approaches need to be identified and funded.

An exploration of the accessibility of philanthropic funding is also required. Australia does not have a strong history or record in this area as is seen in other countries. A better understanding about how philanthropy can be accessed for research – including health services research is needed.



Submission from the Australian College of Midwives

The missed opportunities to do research need to be addressed. Currently for ARC and NHMRC the success rates for Project and Discovery grants is in the order of 19-20%. This means that 80% of research proposed is not funded. A considerable amount of energy and time goes into developing these applications. This is a waste of resources – mostly human. Better ways to streamline applications and make them less onerous needs to be addressed.

What are the health and medical research strategic directions and priorities and how might we meet them?

In our view there are four main areas. These are:

- Health services research
- Translating evidence into practice
- Being a good global citizen
- Developing a strong multi-disciplinary health research workforce

Health services research is critical to transform the health care system to better meet the needs of women and families. Currently, the system is too hospital and intervention focused. In line with primary health care principles and priorities, there is a need to research ways that health care, in our case, maternity care, can be better provided outside the hospital. This includes community-based care, home visiting, community groups and local services.

It is essential to translate evidence into practice. There is a considerable body of evidence about what should be done, but in many cases, this is just not put into practice. In particular, models of maternity care that better use midwives have been shown to be most effective in Australia and internationally. However, these are not widely translated into practice. While producing more evidence is important, actually getting what we know is effective into practice is critical.

Being a good global citizen means ensuring that our research outcomes can address global health needs especially in the region. It is therefore essential to support research conducted in other countries and to facilitate research and practice partnerships. There are limited opportunities to partner with international groups, especially those in developing countries who have little or no track record. Better ways of working together to ensure that evidence developed in resource-rich countries can be translated appropriately into different settings needs to occur.

Finally, developing a strong multi-disciplinary health research workforce is essential. In the past, the health research workforce has been concentrated on basic science and medical professionals. This needs to be broader and include nurses, midwives, allied health providers and others, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. The opportunities for ongoing researcher development



in the non-traditional fields are limited and the funds available are often insufficient. For example, health service leaders (often the very people who are needed to undertake health services research) are usually older and have jobs that are reasonably paid. It is therefore not feasible for them to take a PhD stipend or even the salary offered through NHMRC or ARC grants as it is too much of a drop. This means that the people who would make an excellent contribution to research because of their experience are usually unable to enter this workforce.

How can we optimise translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing?

Currently there is really only one scheme in NHMRC to actually get evidence into practice – the Translating Research into Practice Fellowships. These are only part-time for 2 years and are not at a scale to fund large scale projects. More funding opportunities and commitment to getting evidence into practice is therefore needed.

Contact: Ann Kinnear, Executive Officer



References

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- Commonwealth of Australia (2009). Improving Maternity Services in Australia: Report of the Maternity Services Review. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia.