



INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

Women's Health West (WHW) is the women's health service for the western metropolitan region of Melbourne. Our services include research, health promotion, community development, training and advocacy around women's health, safety and wellbeing. Since 1994, WHW has hosted the region's largest family violence crisis support and prevention program. These two main arms of the service place WHW in a unique position to incorporate women's experiences directly into our research, health promotion and project work, ensuring that we clarify the connections between structural oppression and individual experience.

As a feminist organisation we focus on redressing the gender and structural inequalities that limit the lives of women and girls. WHW's work is underpinned by a social model of health, recognising the important influence of, and aiming to improve, the social, economic and political factors that determine the health, safety and wellbeing of women and their children in our region. By incorporating a gendered approach to health promotion work that focuses on women, interventions to reduce inequality and improve health outcomes will be more effective and equitable.

Informed by our vision of equity and justice for women in the west, WHW's work is guided by the following five strategic goals:

- Delivering and advocating for accessible and culturally appropriate services and resources for women across the region
- Improving conditions in which women live, work and play in the western region of Melbourne
- Putting women's health, safety and wellbeing on the political agenda to improve the status of women
- Recognising that good health, safety and wellbeing begins in our workplace
- Working in partnership with others to achieve our goals.

RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW

Women's Health West (WHW) welcomes the opportunity provided by the Australian Government to comment in response to the strategic review of health and medical research in Australia. Our submission details recommendations in response to questions three and four, as outlined by the review panel.

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

A greater focus on prevention, population health and health promotion are integral to the vision of a healthy and fair Australia. Medical and health research must therefore focus on prevention of disease and the maintenance of health, not simply the treatment of illness. WHW recommends that the strategic directions and priorities for Australian health and medical

research must be informed by the social model of health. A social model of health recognises that people's health and wellbeing are shaped by an array of political, social and economic factors, and in addition to biomedical research, it is these factors that must be researched and acted upon in order to achieve better health outcomes. A social model of health also recognises that health inequities are for the most part attributed to the social determinants of health, such as gender, socioeconomic status, public policy and violence and discrimination.

One of the most important and complex roles of our health system is to ensure health equity is achieved by focusing on the social determinants of health and the impact these have on the health of individuals and the population as a whole. Prioritising research that investigates the social, economic and political determinants that drive ill health and disease and translating this into evidence-based practice is one of the most effective methods of achieving improved health outcomes, particularly among Australia's most disadvantaged communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Health and medical research must be informed by the social model of health
- Health and medical research strategic directions and priorities must be balanced between both social determinants and biomedical influences of health

One of the key aims of the review of health and medical research in Australia is to take into account broader federal government policy. As such, WHW recommends that health and medical research be strategically aligned with the *National Women's Health Policy 2010* and the *National Male Health Policy 2010*. Strategically aligning health and medical research with the identified health priorities targeted for action under the *National Women's Health Policy 2010* is of particular importance, as this policy has received no funding allocation, whereas the *National Male Health Policy 2010* will receive \$16.7 million over four years. Effective and collaborative research, data collection, monitoring, evaluation and knowledge transfer to advance the evidence base on women's health is outlined as one of the five goals of the federal women's health policy. Hence, linking the strategic direction of health and medical research with these national health policies strongly supports policy consistency across government departments and the health sector more broadly.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Health and medical research must be strategically aligned with the *National Women's Health Policy 2010* and the *National Male Health Policy 2010* and other relevant health policy.

With the ever changing nature of national and global health, there is increasing need for collaboration between government and non-government agencies, research and university institutions, service providers and others within and outside the health sector. In an attempt to bring Australia's medical research, education and healthcare sectors into alignment with world leaders, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is in the process of developing a new type of institution in Australia - the Advanced Health Research Centre.

Based on the United Kingdom model, the centres will see universities, medical research institutes and hospitals working in partnership to support research and research translation.

While the Advanced Health Research Centres will work to translate knowledge acquired from biomedical research into improved patient care, health and medical research must also look further to models that investigate and engage sectors traditionally seen as sitting outside the health sector. This is essential as research within the social model of health requires a multidisciplinary approach and engagement with clinicians, universities, the women's and community health sector, industry and a broad range of government and non-government sectors. This is vital given that the causes of health and wellbeing lie outside the health sector and are driven by an array of social, economic and political factors. As such, there must be strong, coordinated whole of government action to tackle the determinant of health and to avoid duplication and fragmentation across departments.

South Australia offers an effective model in achieving such aims. Developed in partnership with the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Government of South Australia released the *Adelaide Statement on Health in all Policies* (2010). The document outlines a blueprint to engage leaders and policy-makers at all level of government – local, regional, national and international. To advance the objectives outlined in the statement, the health sector is required to learn to work in partnership with other sectors. This requires a health sector 'that is outward oriented, open to others, and equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and mandate' (Adelaide Statement on Health in All Policies, 2010: 2). One of the key ways this will be achieved is through pooling intellectual resources, integrating research and sharing wisdom from the field and the provision of feedback mechanisms so that progress is evaluated and monitored at the highest level.

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) is another case in point. VicHealth supports a mix of investigator-led research, strategic research and evaluation research to build evidence for health promotion interventions. Research complements all of their health promotion investments. By supporting excellent research, improving the overall skills of researchers, providing networking opportunities for researchers and connecting research to policy and practice, VicHealth is able to increase the impact of health promotion and public health programs. Their research is multidisciplinary and investigates how to redress the social determinants that drive ill health and disease. This research is then translated to support primary prevention, population health and health promotion approaches in Victoria that works across various sectors – such as media and the arts, sports and recreation, education and training institutions, workplaces and local government. The work of VicHealth has situated Victoria as leaders in primary prevention and population health.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Health and medical research strategic direction and priorities are balanced between the biomedical model and a preventative health model, which engages a whole of government, multidisciplinary approach

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

The translation of health and medical research into improved health and wellbeing outcomes requires research design to be relevant and responsive to the needs of particular communities and target populations. In order to ensure this, WHW recommends that a gender sensitive approach be integrated into health and medical research in order for it to efficiently translate into effective health practice that meets the different needs of women and men.

A gender sensitive approach to medical and health research investigates the ways in which health is shaped by women's and men's positions in society and their access to social and economic resources. It also acknowledges that gender inequity causes many women to experience significant disadvantage, impacting on their physical, mental and social health and wellbeing. The approach also recognises differences among women due to socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, ability, age and sexual orientation. In line with WHO, WHW recommends that 'taking action to improve gender equality in health and to address women's rights to health is one of the most direct and potent ways to reduce health inequalities and ensure effective use of health resources.'

A gendered approach to research means applying a gender analysis framework and gender assessment tools in the development of the research project. The aim of a gender analysis framework is to ensure these gendered differences are anticipated and the research outcomes are focused on achieving gender and health equity. Progressive moves have been made by governments in Canada and the United Kingdom, as well as in the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales, towards a gender equity approach to health and in utilising gender analysis to improve health and medical research, policy and program design, development and delivery.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Health and medical research should where appropriate engage with a gender analysis framework

A National Health and Hospitals Network for Australia's Future (2010) promises to improve responsiveness of the system to local needs and enhance the quality of health services, yet the focus on hospitals and general practitioners puts at risk the ambitious health equity framework that is required to underpin changes to our health system. Moreover, the chronic disease and behavioural change focus of the National Preventative Health Agency – and Medicare Locals it seems – with its emphasis on smoking, binge drinking and obesity, means that a range of important health promotion activities will fall outside their sphere of activity. This leaves initiatives like advocacy, developing healthy public policy, redressing the broader social determinants of health, and acting to reduce inequities and injustices in the community, at risk of being lost. As the World Health Organisation (2005) point out, 'progress towards a healthier world requires strong political action, broad participation and sustained advocacy. Health promotion has an established repertoire of proven effective strategies which need to be

fully utilized'. A commitment to increasing health research, public and social policy and program delivery in the area of preventative health is therefore urgently needed.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Optimising the translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing requires a commitment to broader preventative health strategies aimed at redressing the social determinants of health.

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