



March 23 2012

**WEHI Gender Equity Committee submission to the NHMRC McKeon Review:**

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

Women are over-represented at entry level in the biomedical sciences and decline in number through career progression, until they are dramatically under-represented at the most senior levels of the discipline. This testifies to an alarming loss of highly trained individuals from the health and medical research work force, a concern directly relevant to terms of reference 1 and 6 in the Review:

*1. The need for Australia to build and retain internationally competitive capacity across the research spectrum, from basic discovery research through clinical translation to public health and health services research.*

*6. Strategies to attract, develop and retain a skilled research workforce which is capable of meeting future challenges and opportunities.*

**Preamble (from the Director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute):**

In his submission to the Review, Professor Doug Hilton states (Solution 11):

“In order to make best use of the nation’s available talent, redress the gender equity crisis at senior levels of health and medical research, for example, through programs that assist with childcare, that take account of career interruptions when awarding funding, and that promote workplace flexibility”.

The WEHI Gender Equity Committee aims to address this talent loss through a number of initiatives that assist female scientists through mid-career transitions (when many are also experiencing the commitments of child rearing), and through more broadly applicable programs:

**The programs**

*To retain the talent and skills of its female scientists, the institute:*

- offers the Cory Fellowship, a \$1.25 million, 5-year fellowship for new women laboratory heads
- provides a childcare subsidy of up to \$15,000 per year
- provides financial support to female scientists to employ a research technician to continue their work while on maternity leave
- provides additional time for contract renewal to women who have taken maternity leave
- has family-friendly meeting times to allow parents to balance work and home commitments
- provides a designated room to allow for breastfeeding or expressing of breast milk

- helps parents locate childcare centres
- sponsors a parenting room at all five Lorne Conferences (held in Victoria), to enable scientists with families to attend. The parenting room is open to all delegates and genders
- holds fora for the Australian scientific community to discuss gender equity issues and to collectively overcome them

*The institute provides resources to women throughout their careers, not only their child-rearing years. These include:*

- funding senior postdoctoral scientists to attend strategic and leadership programs
- running a 'Women In Science' lecture series, featuring eminent female scientists, with the opportunity to participate in informal round-table discussions
- sending delegates to participate in the annual Women In Science conference in Canberra

*The institute is developing new ways of creating a flexible working environment for parents. Projects close to completion include:*

- developing a mentoring program for all early career scientists, but especially women
- constructing a family room available to all staff to assist parents with emergency childcare. The room will open in July 2012.
- developing a business case for an Institute childcare facility.

In addition to these institutional initiatives, we believe the NHMRC should address these gender equity issues nationally:

- Clearer guidelines and allowances for family leave for CI's and fellows
- Official recognition for institutional support roles (committee work, mentoring, training)
- Nationally available register of women biomedical researchers for conference chairs and speakers
- Quota of women on NHMRC committees

The McKeon Review highlights the need to make relevant international comparisons to ensure best practices. Another relevant term of reference is:

*7. Examine the institutional arrangements and governance of the health and medical research sector, including strategies to enhance community and consumer participation. This will include comparison of the NHMRC to relevant international jurisdictions.*

When discussing Australian institutional arrangements that are relevant to improving the participation of women in the medical research at all levels, we have much to learn from international comparisons. A very large number of universities in the US, the UK and Europe now have Offices or Centres of *Work and Life*, or Offices of *Equity*, or special *Programs for Women*. The specific aims of these offices, centres or programs

vary widely, but all seek to address the inequities that reduce the participation of women in institutional life. Examples include teaching relief and tenure clock extension to (both) parents of newborns, subsidized childcare within the institution, assistance for childcare for women in emergencies and for attending conferences, a diversity committee and leadership seminars for women, and many similar activities and programs. We feel that Australian universities and medical research institutes should be encouraged to learn from our international colleagues ways of addressing the entrenched inequities that limit the participation of women in medical research.