

SRHMRA Submission 15 — Dr Melinda Fitzgerald

As a scientist conducting research into strategies to limit the effect of injury to the central nervous system, I submit that medical research in Australia should be funded at an increased level. This submission addresses the terms of reference 2, 3 and 7.

Australian medical research is cost effective and of an excellent standard. However, researchers in the middle of their career are not supported. 'Research only' scientists must find their own salaries through the competitive granting system. Fellowships available to medical researchers less than 12 years after completion of their PhD are highly competitive with a very low success rate. Scientists can support their salaries through Project grant applications, but many of these that are considered fundable are not funded due to the lack of money available. Therefore middle career researchers are losing their salaries and consequently their careers.

The loss of middle career researchers is a waste of the resources that went into training them. Middle careers researchers of my acquaintance are frequently depressed, highly stressed and contemplating giving up the career they entered with enthusiasm. Such a mental state is not conducive to creative thought or happiness.

As a direct supervisor of many PhD and Honours students I do not feel able to advise them to enter a career in medical research. I have to be honest and tell them of the many obstacles in their path and the small likelihood of a sustainable salary. At the moment, medical research is a poor career choice in this country and does not allow scientists to feel that they have a secure income stream to support their families.

I suggest that middle career medical researchers with a demonstrable track record of publications (acceptable numbers to be defined and to take into account differences in average publication rates and journal impact factors in the various fields of endeavour) should be guaranteed a salary and a certain minimum amount of bench money. Researchers could then apply for further grants to employ assistants with the knowledge that their own salary is secure and that they have the freedom to think 'outside the box' without always having to play it safe and second guess grant review panels.