

## **Submission to the Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research**

### **Submission summary**

To be a clever country Australia must have a viable, internationally competitive health and medical research sector. We need to promote energetic and innovative science, which saves lives, improves individual health and productivity and yields significant economic benefits. A robust medical research community ensures that Australians have the best access to cutting edge medical technology, as participants in clinical trials, and gives hope to those among us fighting the many diseases for which there is no cure or treatment.

### **Australia needs a robust health and medical research sector**

Australia enjoys an international standing that belies its relatively small population. Our scientists are world leaders in many areas of medical research and have made discoveries of great benefit to individuals and the wider public health system, here and around the world. The bionic ear, the cervical cancer vaccine and the use of specialized growth factors to treat cancer are just three examples from many of Australian research successes that have changed or saved lives. Without continued public funding, Australia risks not only thwarting future health and medical research discoveries but also an exodus of talented researchers, who will leave Australia to continue their work in overseas laboratories.

Protecting the health and medical research budget is critical if the Federal Government is to ensure the financial future of Australia, to protect Australian jobs and to heed to the will of the Australian people. Maintaining a viable, internationally competitive health and medical research sector is essential in order to ensure that the Australian medical research community can continue to important contributions to our national health outcomes, healthcare costs and the economy. Without National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) funding Australian scientists could not conduct important basic research for which a commercial benefit is not yet apparent. Cutting the NHMRC budget, as was rumoured last year (Australian Life Scientist, April 6, 2011), would not only halt important research projects and threaten their long-term continuation, but would also jeopardize the significant economic benefits yielded by medical research. A Deloitte Access Economics report, released in October 2011, and commissioned by the Australian Society for Medical Research, found that for every \$1 invested in cancer research there was \$1.70 in benefit to the community. Moreover, the report found that there was a greater than five-fold economic return on NHMRC investments in cardiovascular disease (CVD) research. CVD and cancer are the NHMRC's two highest-funded disease areas.

These benefits go beyond simple financial returns, they include reducing community health care costs, increasing individual's productivity and well-being and commercialization opportunities that see Australian patients get priority access to the latest health and medical technologies in clinical trials. Pharmaceutical companies rely on the outcomes of publicly funded research for the identification of new drug targets and the development of novel treatment therapies. This benefits all Australians by improving health outcomes and reducing healthcare costs.

Australians recognise the important contributions made by their medical researchers. In an 2010 survey (Auspoll, Community Attitudes to Health and Medical Research, 2010) 98% of Australian voters saw 'increasing funding for health and medical research' as important for the Federal Government to be focusing on in the next few years, and 40% of them said it was

extremely important. In contrast, only 12% of voters said it was extremely important for the Federal Government to be 'lowering taxes for business'.

Federal Government support must be maintained if Australia's medical researchers are to continue to make discoveries that will improve healthcare in the future. To paraphrase Ross Garnaut (The Age, June 1, 2011), I do not accept that Australia is a pissant country. Australian scientists strive to be global leaders in their chosen fields, the Australian Government must show leadership of its own to protect our health and medical research sector.

### **Management and funding**

Australia does not have the United States' culture of philanthropy. Consequently, researchers largely rely on public and/or government funding to finance their work. Important basic research, which does not have a clear pathway to the clinic, does not generally attract commercial interest. Peer review based grant review is not a perfect system, but is better than any alternative that I can think. That said, the NHMRC must acknowledge the flaws, and the potential for inherent unfairness, in its review approach (Graves, Barnett & Clark, BMJ, 2011).

Perhaps if more enticing tax concessions were offered, medical research institutes might have greater success in attracting corporate partnerships/sponsorships. Furthermore, although most Australians acknowledge health and medical research as a good thing, many Australians have little understanding of what the research sector does; this is something the Australian research community itself needs to address, especially if it wants to justify greater government funding.