

SRHMRA Submission 187 — Australian Society of Microbiology

In the history of microbes and humans, the current era will be seen as one of opportunities, both lost and gained. We have started the modern era with the discovery of antibiotics which were hailed as an advance that would result in the eradication of all infectious disease on the planet as announced by US Secretary of State George Marshall in 1948. Sadly, this prophecy proved premature and by 1990 this age of hubris was replaced with the reality of the spread of multidrug resistant (MDR) infectious disease which threatens to undermine our public health system of today. In affluent societies such as that of Australia, the public health system has indeed limited the spread of infectious disease in the community. However, this has been a partial victory, with our own indigenous population suffering under a disease burden that is akin to that seen in poorer societies. In addition, the globalisation of travel has resulted in the spread of infectious disease at unprecedented rates around the globe as was recently demonstrated by H5N1 influenzae. A close examination of this situation indicates that Australia must maintain a viable, internationally competitive health and medical research sector devoted to infectious disease that (a) prepares emergency procedures within Australia for the identification, tracking and quarantine of introduced infectious disease from around the globe, (b) undertakes outreach educational programs and research training to assist our nearest neighbours to control infectious disease within their borders, and (c) develops strategies for the future control of infectious disease including preventative measures such as the development of new vaccines and drug treatment options. A thriving research base has allowed Australia to play an important role in the strategic South-East Asia region and to be an active participant of the World Health Organisation. As a testament to Australia's preeminence in research into infectious disease, it is interesting to note that 4 out of 12 Noble prizes awarded to Australians are infectious diseases related. In conclusion, it is essential that the National Health and Medical Research Council continue to fund research into infectious disease at the same levels that we currently have today to ensure that we have a thriving research community to undertake these important activities on behalf of the Australian public and for the assistance of our international neighbours.