



Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia: Submission from the Australasian Research Management Society

The Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia. In this submission, we address the following key question asked by the Panel:

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

ARMS is the professional society for research managers and administrators, with 1698 members, of whom a significant proportion support health and medical research in Australia. ARMS therefore brings a unique perspective to the Review. Its members work at all levels in government policy, funding and service delivery agencies; in universities, research institutes and centres; and in hospitals and other clinical environments. They are acutely aware of the need to increase the health and medical research system's efficiency and effectiveness, to reduce transaction costs and achieve sustainable, higher impact results from investment.

This submission is based on our members' experience in leading organisations and teams; devising, integrating, communicating and implementing health and medical research programs; allocating and managing research funding; ensuring compliance and quality; and monitoring research project results. We focus here on three areas: reducing complexity, including that caused by funding models; improving research management expertise; and the benefits of a national approach to research governance and research integrity.

1. Reducing complexity

1.1 Systematic causes of inefficiency and ineffectiveness

Research managers wrestle daily with systems that are inefficient, ineffective and inconsistent. All too often research managers find it necessary to develop workarounds or add-ons to enable processes to function, which exacerbates the complexity of the system as a whole and leads to significant duplication of effort. The following examples illustrate this.

- Researchers work in quite different employment, funding and influence situations across hospitals, medical research institutes (MRIs) and universities. In hospitals or state health departments, clinical researchers can be 'forgotten' in policy and infrastructure decisions. For instance, firewall restrictions for clinical purposes can prevent researchers in the hospital system from accessing online collaborative research tools easily, or limit what they can view and share.
- Indirect funding arrangements vary not only by scheme (in public, private and philanthropic schemes) but also institution type. Indirect funding can be defined as the costs incurred in research that cannot be directly attributed to individual projects.¹ Research support services such as animal and human research ethics, financial management, governance and overarching evaluation are excluded from some funding arrangements. Nonetheless, institutions have to find resources for these elements as they are essential. Funding for research infrastructure – assets, facilities and services² – is also inconsistent across schemes and organisation types. In hospitals, for example, where grants do not come with the indirect costs attached,

¹ Allen Consulting Group, *Indirect costs of university research funded through Australian Competitive Grants*, innovation.gov.au/Research/ResearchBlockGrants/Documents/IndirectCostsUniResearch.pdf, p10

² National Research Infrastructure Council definition, see innovation.gov.au/Science/ResearchInfrastructure/Documents/StrategicFrameworkforResearchInfrastructureInvestment.pdf

research managers find themselves competing with clinical service demands to ensure the indirect costs of research are met. Meanwhile MRI researchers receive a fraction of the infrastructure funding available to university-based researchers for exactly the same type of grant, from exactly the same funding body.

It is not uncommon for initiatives to be developed between agencies and researchers, or between researchers from multiple organisations, without reference to research management issues and potential unintended consequences, such as unclear employment arrangements and intellectual property (IP) ownership. Research managers often only become involved later, particularly when problems have arisen.

1.2 Solutions to increase consistency and certainties

Involving research managers in planning initiatives and changes will be a significant step towards greater effectiveness and efficiency. For example, while ARMS supports the concept of academic/advanced health science centres, engagement of research managers is critical to ensure that such centres mark a true improvement on current arrangements.

No doubt many submissions to the Review raise the issue of indirect funding. ARMS would like to emphasise the need to resolve the inconsistencies and gaps in current funding arrangements. This would include recognition, in funding and the development of policies and processes, of the important role played by research managers and administrators who navigate across organisations, bridging different interests and providing essential research services, strategic planning and implementation.

Creating real incentives for organisations engaged in research to diversify their funding streams is critical, particularly industry investment and philanthropy. However, diversity will increase complexity unless balanced with greater harmonisation of initiatives and programs. Reducing transaction costs and streamlining processes, so that industry and philanthropists can see the direct benefits of their investment, must also be a priority.

There is potential for stronger alignment of initiatives and programs at national and state levels, such as integration of peer review processes. This could extend to industry and philanthropic programs as well.

2. Professional development

2.1 Fragmentation in professional development of researchers and research managers

Research managers have a broad range and depth of skills. Many are or have been researchers while others come from diverse backgrounds, such as law and technology.

Researchers are expected to possess skills such as project management, finance, communications, recruitment and revenue-raising on top of their research expertise. Professional development (PD) in these areas is provided in many cases by research managers, but there is not currently a cohesive framework to follow.³

To improve skills among research managers, ARMS has developed a comprehensive PD framework. The Society is now considering how it can better contribute to structured training of researchers, building on the training that its members already provide.

2.2 Solutions to build expertise across the system

A national, structured approach to management and leadership skills development for researchers as well as research managers and administrators would increase the return on investment in health and medical research. It would enable institutions to implement training at a lower cost, using best practice, with greater coverage and sharing of resources. ARMS would welcome being part of the creation and delivery of such a national approach.

³ A recent *Nature* article by an early career researcher highlighted the challenges for researchers. See [nature.com/news/scientists-must-be-taught-to-manage-1.10334](https://www.nature.com/news/scientists-must-be-taught-to-manage-1.10334)

Support for training of individuals who would transcend organisational boundaries, facilitating and navigating within and across organisations, would help to improve the undertaking of research and its translation into practice.

Structured education of funders – both government and private sources – regarding the research process would also help to maximise return on investment in research.

3. Research integrity and governance

3.1 Incomplete progress

Efforts nationally have produced progress towards streamlining of ethical review processes, exemplified by Memoranda of Understanding for multicentre research and the Mutual Acceptance Initiative that began in February in NSW, Queensland and Victoria. ARMS has had a special interest group for ethics and research integrity for several years and is now active in the Australian Ethics Network, helping to share best practice.

But such consistent, collaborative approaches are not yet widespread, let alone mandated, Australia-wide. Inconsistency and systematic gaps still beset research ethics and governance. Best practice approaches take many years to filter through the system, as seen in varying expectations of IP ownership. The greater attention that is rightly being placed on research ethics and research governance are also adding to the costs of research year by year, cutting productivity due to delays and building greater need for specialist expertise.

3.2 Streamlining integrity and governance

Research governance arrangements also need to be streamlined. Greater quality and consistency in governance and ethics could be achieved through a national research **integrity and governance body**. The US National Institutes of Health Ethics Office (ethics.od.nih.gov) is a successful model that could be adapted for the Australian context. It provides resources, training and consistent principles, policies and procedures. An alternative with an even broader mandate would be a research ombudsman.

A national approach would reduce inefficiencies. It would greatly reduce the transaction costs in funding research and improve oversight of research management and administration, by filling a gap between the awarding of grants and reporting of outcomes. It would also encourage greater funding diversity. For example, a national body could create and oversee master agreements for ethics and streamline the process of setting up new sources of funding, typically philanthropic or industry.

4. Key recommendations

ARMS believes health and medical research are fundamental for Australian society. Greater support should be given to research in these areas through financial, infrastructure, personnel and management mechanisms.

Specifically, the Society urges the Review Panel in its work to:

1. Encourage the involvement of individuals with accredited research management expertise in planning initiatives and changes
2. Foster frameworks for funding that include services to research such as ethics bodies, financial management, internal research evaluation and strategy
3. Support a cohesive, high quality program of education and training in research management, for researchers and managers of research
4. Consider the merits of a national research integrity and governance body as part of greater consistency in research management arrangements in Australia.

We would be happy to further expand upon any points raised in this submission or otherwise where the Review Panel believes a research management perspective will be valuable.