

Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research

SUBMISSION

From the Jean Hailes Research Unit, School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria

We are pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the review, and have chosen to respond to three of the four questions posed:

- *How might health and medical research be best managed and funded in Australia?*
(Terms of Reference 2, 3 and 7)
- *What are the health and medical research strategic directions and priorities and how might we meet them?*
(Terms of Reference 5, 12 and 13)
- *How can we optimise translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing?*
(Terms of Reference 4, 8, 9, 10 and 11)

The Jean Hailes Research Unit

The Jean Hailes Research Unit is a partnership between Monash University and Jean Hailes for Women's Health, a not-for-profit organisation with a primary focus on knowledge translation for the benefit of women, their families, and health professionals. It is located in the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine at Monash University. Its program of research and research translation is based on a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding women's health across the life course, with a particular focus on reproductive health and mental health. The research is informed by a social model of health, underscored by an appreciation of the significance of gender. Men and children are thus included in research as integral to the context of women's lives.

Current research undertaken by the group includes:

- Mental health promotion, including in the perinatal period;
- Psychosocial aspects of fertility and infertility;
- The ramifications of breast cancer and its treatment, especially for reproductive and sexual mental health;
- The consequences of chronic non-communicable diseases for sexual and reproductive health and fertility;
- Women's mental health in resource-constrained countries, particularly during adolescence and in the perinatal period, including its consequences for early childhood development;
- Quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation methods.

Research staff are drawn from a wide range of disciplines, including biological sciences, education, epidemiology, gender studies, human resource management, implementation science, medicine, nursing, psychology, public health, sociology, and statistics. The pioneering partnership between an academic institution and a not-for-profit organisation ensures that all research results are efficiently and appropriately translated to meet community and professional needs and that there is active consumer participation in the framing of research questions and the conduct of research.

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

Source of funding

To ensure that research keeps pace with Australia's growing population, with the increasing complexity of health and medical needs, and with our place as a sophisticated liberal democracy that has capabilities to contribute to the needs of the resource-constrained countries of our region and internationally, we strongly support the primary role of government funding for research and research translation.

- Government funding should ideally be increased to enable multicentre collaborations to undertake complex projects and generate high level evidence.
 - At the very least, it should be maintained at the current level.
- Additional funding options should be facilitated, including:

- Models that incorporate philanthropic and not-for-profit funding;
- Public-private partnerships;
- Co-funding.
- Because a healthy work force improves productivity, companies could be encouraged to increase their research funding and research partnerships by strengthening tax benefits and other incentives. Companies might support:
 - Research and research translation that contributes to the health and wellbeing of their workforce;
 - Research related to their business or personnel areas of interest or need;
 - Research that improves public health;
 - Dissemination and health promotion.

Researcher support

- Increasing support for researchers would be an efficient use of research funding, would contribute to the retention of skilled researchers, and would improve the wellbeing and thereby the productivity of research personnel.
 - Offering ongoing employment instead of short-term contracts and casual work is desirable.
 - A mechanism is needed for funding the full costs of medium- to long-term employment of researchers with demonstrated track records of research and research translation in priority areas, subject to satisfactory review.
 - In addition to increasing the availability of continuing research positions, it is desirable to continue to allow CIs to apply for salaries on NHMRC grants and to extend this option to CIA.

Expanding criteria for attracting funding

- Although interdisciplinary research is yielding some of the most original insights and advances, it can be more difficult to publish than pure science. It would encourage diverse research and acknowledge the value of psychosocial research if the criteria for excellence in track record appraisal were expanded beyond a simple summing of each academic's grant income and number of peer-reviewed publications to additional evidence of outputs, including:
 - translation into policy and clinical practice;
 - use of diverse modes of communication (policy briefs, podcasts, webinars, opinion pieces) to diverse audiences;
 - innovative modes of health professional and consumer education (on-line Active Learning Modules and accessible plain language public resources);
 - consideration of the discipline, research method, length of papers, and number of authors on each paper, as well as the number of papers.

What are the health and medical research strategic directions and priorities and how might we meet them?

Social determinants of health:

- There is clear evidence that both mental and physical health are to a large extent socially determined. In order to guard against oversimplified explanatory models and interventions, there is a need to investigate social determinants, including gender disadvantage, education, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, health status (including disability, chronic illness, mental health), rural/remote/urban residence, and housing stability in all health research.

Gender

- One of the most significant and commonly neglected social determinants of health is gender-based risk. We have moved beyond the many decades in which health and medical research was conducted solely with men, often on the grounds of controlling for hormonal and other variables identified as differentiating the sexes. However,
 - women's health needs are not the same as men's health needs, although each is strongly influenced by the other;

- wealth and medical research should be conducted in such a way that results can be sex-disaggregated;
- women's lives in Australia are still constrained by gender-based role restrictions and disparities in responsibilities for unpaid work. Gender interacts with other neglected social risks, including violence and poverty, to influence health.

Diversity

- Australia's pluralist population demands research with diverse categories of people.
 - There is a need to include marginalised groups in all research and to investigate their specific health and medical needs, including:
 - people experiencing mental ill-health;
 - people with co-morbid conditions;
 - people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees and asylum seekers;
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
 - people of diverse sex, gender, and sexuality, including those who do not identify as heterosexual;
 - people with disabilities;
 - people with chronic non-communicable diseases;
 - people experiencing homelessness and unstable housing;
 - families formed in non-traditional ways, including through the use of assisted reproductive technology with and with third parties.
 - Public health research must be conducted in such a way that its social and cultural context is acknowledged:
 - Cultural context should be understood as important to health research in particular.
 - Acknowledgment of cultural context means that care must be taken and funding provided to include (rather than exclude) specific sub-populations and categories of people in health and medical research.
 - Diverse research methods can improve the quality and variety of evidence obtained from research.
 - Qualitative research methods in health research can extend the understanding of the human aspect of health and medical practice, reveal meaning and explanation, and contribute to the relevance of more traditional research methods.

Prevention

- It is essential that research designed to improve well-being and prevent physical and mental ill-health, including psychosocial research, is funded fairly and not at a lower level than laboratory-based or clinical research:
 - Outcomes of prevention research should contribute to a comprehensive understanding of modifiable risk and protective factors that lie outside individual control, and contribute to evidence-informed mechanisms for change.

Extended lives

- As Australia's population lives longer, and as the prospect of having a single employer or occupation throughout the working life diminishes, essential components of future research will be:
 - How to lead a meaningful life when meaning is not derived from employment.
 - How to prevent or manage depression and anxiety and promote wellbeing when this is not available via employment.
- As people are enabled to live with diseases that would previously have led to death or disability, essential components of future research will include:
 - How best to assist people living with chronic ill health to lead fulfilling and productive lives.

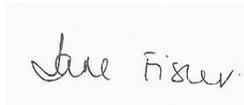
How can we optimise translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing?

Knowledge translation is of fundamental importance

- A detailed research translation strategy should be a required component of grant applications and a criterion for attracting funding.
- Effective translation and dissemination should also be funded explicitly within research projects.
 - Our experience has been that this is the budget component of our grants that has been diminished or deleted.
- Partnerships such as The Jean Hailes Research Unit at Monash University, which comprises an academic research unit and a not-for-profit organisation specialising in research translation and dissemination, need to be acknowledged as valuable contributors to health research in Australia.
 - The JH model of research translation is flexible, multidisciplinary, and multifaceted. It targets health professionals and the community by:
 - enhancing the health literacy of consumers through community seminar programs, a high-circulation magazine, social media platform engagement, web- and print-based content and resources, and regular email updates to its wide networks throughout Australia;
 - informing and supporting health professionals through multimodal educational opportunities (provided free of charge), a speaker request program, train-the-trainer, webmail education and research updates, collaborations through web-based communities such as HealthShare, and other social media interaction.

There should be mechanisms for facilitating and funding these exemplary and productive partnerships.

We endorse the review of health and medical research and look forward to learning the recommendations.



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On behalf of

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