

SRHMRA Submission 32 — A/Prof Michael Lawrence

I wish to make two points on the question "How might health and medical research be best managed and funded in Australia?"

Point 1: There is an enormous amount of work required on the part of researchers when lodging NHMRC Project Grant proposals, on the part of assessors when providing reports on such proposals and on the part of Panels working out which proposals to recommend for funding. In particular, the amount of work involved is considerably more than that required for comparable grants in other countries for which I have been a grant referee. The activities of writing and reviewing grants are also largely undertaken by mid- or established-career researchers, to the considerable detriment of their actual productivity, particularly when taking into account the overall success rate of applications. That is, every year there is a loss of thousands of highly skilled person-hours that could otherwise be spent in productive research. This is especially poignant when the outcome of the entire process is perceived by many to be no better than a lottery.

Recommendation: While I acknowledge the need for a competitive system, I call for a massive simplification of the Project Grant application and review processes.

Point 2: The NHMRC Research Fellowship Scheme appears to me to be considerably underfunded, with the result that the level of career achievement that researchers have when they enter the scheme is often required to be considerably higher than that prescribed in the Scheme's guidelines for their level of actual appointment within the Scheme. The effect of this is a significant negative impact on the attractiveness of medical research as a career pathway.

Recommendation: I recommend that significant new funding be injected into the Research Fellowship Scheme to restore alignment between career achievement and level of appointment within the Scheme.

Implementation of my suggestions would lead to a significant improvement in research productivity and in the attractiveness of medical research as a career.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Review.