

SRHMRA Submission 33 — Seth Masters

I would like to propose 3 changes that, in my opinion, would improve the practice of health and medical research in Australia.

1. Improve the NHMRC granting system. Currently researchers spend too much time trying to much time writing grants, and referee's find it very difficult to award these to the best applications. Instead funding should move away from the project, and towards the track record of the applicant. Metrics should be employed, and money should be spent researching the best metrics to use. Emphasis should be placed on achievement relative to opportunity, so as to fund young investigators.
2. More safety nets, less PhD's. Increasingly, people are becoming disillusioned with the career paths open to biomedical researchers. This reflects the increasing number of uncompetitive PhD graduates, and cut-throat nature of fellowship applications. Universities encourage PhD students as free researchers, but this should be reduced, as many are not competitive graduates. More safety nets should be available for early career researchers – first they should be able to apply widely for fellowships, and at any time during a continuing fellowship. Second, grants should be awarded for limited times, or on reduced budgets, for early career researchers whose grants missed out on funding by small margins.
3. Increase funding of basic research. The general public want better health care, and are prepared to pay higher taxes to find new cures for diseases they are likely to suffer. Currently the field's ability to perform "translational" research is limited, and only a small number of people can generate significant results in this way. This is an inherent limitation of the methodology, not of funding. Instead we need more basic research. That is where the next signalling pathway will be found and a blockbuster drug designed – generating even more revenue and investment in Australia. This can only happen if funding is increased to basic biomedical research.

Health and medical research is a vital component of a stable Australian economy, and this will only become more important over time. Any step backwards risks the entire sector, as it only functions with a critical mass, that can easily work in the USA, Europe, or in coming years, China. The people of Australia want increased funding of health and medical research, and donate voluntarily to this cause en masse, however the government is in a much better position to decide how public money gets used in this pursuit, and how much. The general public are happy to increasingly fund this cause because they know it will generate the health care they need in the future, increased investment and jobs in Australia.