

SRHMRA Submission 48 — Nicole Cloonan

Regarding the way health and medical research is managed and funded in Australia:

A rough calculation suggests that every single year, there are more than 700 "research years" lost to writing, reviewing, and ranking grant applications for funding by the NHMRC. This time will only increase under the current funding model. The substantial investment in both buildings for medical research, and the number of PhD graduates that increases every year puts immense strain on a funding system that has not increased to match. Without a commensurate rise in research funding there is necessarily increased competition and an increased need for every scientist to spend yet more time raising funds and less time performing research.

Each year, approximately 80% of NHMRC applications are deemed worthy of funding, and yet only 20% are awarded. The ranking of these grants is largely random [1], and subject to intense and often unjust scrutiny, and success often requires that >50% of the research proposal has already been performed successfully.

If the selection process is at least partly random for the middle-road applicants (those that are neither "must fund urgently" or clearly unfundable), then why not capitalise on this and make it truly random. I would much rather put my business card in a fish bowl and accept the outcome of a lottery than worry about hostile Professor X shooting down my application at the last minute because I challenged his work at a conference last month. Researchers could get back to researching and innovating, whilst the hefty administration costs could be reduced to a mere \$20 fish bowl and a work-experience kid to fish out the cards. I'll personally chip in another \$50 if you need a bigger bowl.

Others have written on this more eloquently and less flippantly [2], and there is still plenty to debate regarding the pros and cons of a particular funding model proposed. What is clear though, is that if something is not done soon, the pressure of competition will become too much bear, and we will lose many of our brightest problem solvers who will solve their own employment woes by leaving scientific research entirely.

[1] <http://www.bmj.com/content/343/bmj.d4797.full>

[2] <http://theconversation.edu.au/fingers-crossed-the-role-of-randomness-in-medical-research-funding-3536>