

SRHMRA Submission 56 — James Murphy

As a medical researcher, I have a number of concerns about the way research is presently funded in Australia.

1. The term of grants. Currently, with a three year standard project grant, the creativity of researchers and tackling more ambitious projects is severely restricted. Furthermore, short term funding imposes a severe limitation on time available to do the work proposed, since 2-3 months per year are spent preparing and reviewing grants. Funding grants for 5 year terms, rather than 3 year terms, would greatly reduce the administrative burden on researchers, provide greater job security for researchers, and permit researchers to tackle more complex problems that require longer time commitments. We struggle with the present scheme to make giant leaps in our understanding of disease within a three year term. The current scheme favours researchers making small increments towards understanding a problem to ensure track records are sufficiently strong for funding on a three year cycle. As a result, the big picture can often be blurred.
2. Funding people. Currently, there is insufficient funding for researcher salaries, meaning medical research cannot be considered a secure career. Medical researchers in Australia are not highly paid, especially considering their qualifications and experience, but most would choose no other career. As a result, it is with tremendous regret that some in the field have been forced to leave because their salary could not be met from grants. It would be a huge advance to make more fellowships available to provide the job security to entice a next generation of researchers and prevent existing researchers from leaving the field. Currently, a gulf exists between schemes to support those who have just completed PhDs to those who are established. The leap from early- to mid-career researcher to NHMRC Senior Fellow is a giant crevasse, where only the most established researchers are supported at the latter level. There needs to be planning to allow a career path from immediately post-PhD to the senior level, much like a tenure track. Further, such a pathway could potentially address the current imbalance in established women researchers by supporting women who wish to break from research to start a family. Funding people, rather than projects, for longer terms would ensure that the present “publish-or-perish” philosophy can be secondary to performing groundbreaking research.
3. A gap between awarded funds and the cost of research. This discrepancy is most evident when applying for Project grants; the PSP levels do not match the cost of employing a staff member. This means fewer persons can be employed to work on the project or the direct research costs diminished to cover the oversight.
4. A more efficient review process. The New Zealand Marsden Fund has a highly-efficient, two-step review process. A 2-page proposal is put forth in the first round along with a brief CV. These are ranked by a panel of experts and the top 50% proceed to a stage where the

researcher is asked to submit a complete proposal. The lower 50% then are given feedback on how to improve their proposals to make them competitive in future rounds. Overall, this means half of the researchers do not need to commit 2-3 months of their year to writing an unsuccessful proposal and can do what they do best instead: research.

5. International collaboration. Many successful projects rely on the commitment of large international teams. Current funding rules restrict the travel of researchers to international meetings, where many of these collaborations are forged and the global reputations of the researcher are cemented. It is imperative that guidelines are revised, even with strict monitoring procedures, to ensure medical researchers can travel to communicate their work and build teams with researchers abroad.

I also have a reservation regarding current quarantine measures in Australia. In light of the increasingly international collaborative research efforts mentioned above, we are often reliant on receiving research materials from overseas. We prepare proper quarantine documentation, yet constantly there are delays and costs associated with importing research materials. A more efficient, streamlined, costless border procedure would be welcomed by researchers. This will enable us to get the job done more rapidly without diminishing our available provisions for direct research costs.