

SRHMRA Submission 7 — Mark Graham

My submission relates to "How might health and medical research be best managed and funded in Australia?"

It is barely acknowledged that advances in medical research are underpinned by achievements in the enabling sciences, such as physics and chemistry. For example, the 2010 Nobel Prize for Chemistry was for discovering the chemistry that underpins DNA sequencing – the current speed of everyday medical research and the human genome project would be impossible without this discovery! But because they were chemists, they didn't get a cent of medical research funding. The current NHMRC funding schemes are openly hostile to anyone without a clear and immediate focus on medical research outcomes and even recommend that technical contributions should not be acknowledged on medical research articles. This is an incredibly backward approach.

Medical research (and the sub-field, cancer research) has been like the mining sector, it gets all the attention and hollows out the skills base of all the other sectors. My advice is to consider if it is really possible to throw money at a problem? History suggests it is not possible to pick winners. In my opinion, a more successful strategy is to spread the money is more evenly, including areas where an obvious outcome is not immediately foreseeable. I imagine this goes against the grain for people who want to focus on translation, but in my opinion you have to have a broad base to support the high end. Currently in Australia we have a bulge of medical research with a narrow base and not much translation. For this to change, Institutes that conduct medical research need to employ and provide career paths for researchers from a broad range of fields (e.g. chemistry, physics, bioinformatics) and this won't change without a similar change in who and what the NHMRC funds.