



A Response to the

**The Independent Review of Health and Medical Research in
Australia**

Hobart Women's Health Centre

March 2012

The Hobart Women's Health Centre (HWHC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to *The Independent Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia*. HWHC, as a community based feminist women's health service, is informed by principles of social justice and a philosophy which recognises the need for a gendered approach to health within a social context, as endorsed by governments throughout Australia.

It is from this broad holistic perspective, focusing on primary interventions as well as a preventative approach to women's health, that the following submission is presented.

Summary of Recommendations:

Health and medical research strategic directions and priorities are balanced in focus between recognising both social and individual determinants of health.

Health and medical research strategic directions and priorities are balanced in focus between the medical model and preventative health model approaches.

Health and medical research strategic directions and priorities focus on a multidisciplinary approach which integrates disciplines both within the health area and links the health sector with areas traditionally seen as outside of health.

Health and medical research must include a gender analysis framework and assessment tool.

Optimising the translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing requires a commitment to broader preventative health strategies aimed at addressing the social determinants of health.

Health and medical research focus on the effects of the broader health care reform process on community based preventative health care organisations.

What are the health and medical research strategic directions and priorities and how might we meet them?

(Terms of Reference 12, The degree of alignment between Australia's health and medical research activities and the determinants of good health, the nation's burden of disease profile and national health priorities, in particular "closing the gap" between indigenous and non indigenous Australians)

Researchers in women's health have continuously advocated for a social model of health on which to base strategic directions and priorities. A social model of health recognises:

- health is determined by a broad range of social, environmental, economic and biological factors
- differences in health status and health objectives are linked to social determinants of health such as gender, age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability, location and environment, race, and sexual orientation.

- alongside high quality illness treatment services, it is also necessary to address health promotion, disease prevention, equity of access to appropriate and affordable services and strengthening the primary health care system.
- information, consultation, advocacy and community development are important elements of the health process.

The recently released [National Women's Health Policy](#) (NWHP), 2010, brings together the work of a vast range of stakeholders to put forward a cohesive policy direction for the next 20 years for women's health in Australia. The culmination of this work presented in the NWHP reflects the equal priorities of:

- Maintaining and developing health services and prevention programs to treat and avoid disease through targeting health issues that will have the greatest impact over the next two decades; and
- Aiming to address health inequalities through the broader reforms addressing the social determinants of health (p.7).

The need to refocus our efforts towards research into preventative health measures on both the individual disease level and the social structural level is also acknowledged at the highest levels of government. "Over the last two decades, the burden of disease has altered significantly. Chronic disease and mental health have replaced acute infectious diseases and acute vascular events as the leading cause of morbidity and mortality." The 'Minister recognises the need for preventative health care research and the need for a broader approach (lifestyle) to managing chronic conditions and mental health. A focus is needed on prevention research rather than only considering health in terms of medical model ' The Minister goes one step further when he states, "the research landscape is also changing and our investment should reflect this changed landscape and what the community and research sector sees as important. HWHC calls for a firmer commitment from the government in that any investment *will* reflect what the community and research sector sees as important. If efficient translation of research into improved health outcomes is to be achieved then increased resources must be directed toward preventative health research, policy and program development.

[Media Release - The Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, Mark Butler, 26 September 2011](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Health and medical research strategic directions and priorities are balanced in focus between recognising both social and individual determinants of health.

Health and medical research strategic directions and priorities are balanced in focus between the medical model and preventative health model approaches.

The changing face of health and health research also calls for a determined effort to encourage collaboration between health sectors. This call is creating increasing interest amongst areas such as medical research, education and healthcare which are looking toward other successful models overseas. Commentators point to 'a new proposal, modelled on a successful UK initiative, which aims to meet this challenge by establishing new centres where patient care is integrated with research and education. In an attempt to bring Australia's medical research, education and healthcare sectors into line with world

leaders, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is planning to develop a new type of institution in Australia: the [Advanced Health Research Centre \(AHRC\)](#).’

Health research must also look further to models aimed at linking sectors traditionally seen as outside of health, including researchers, clinicians, community stakeholders, industry and government sectors. A broader social view of health research requires such a multidisciplinary approach.

Different levels of government across Australia are, to differing degrees, taking on board the notion of health across sectors. The South Australian Government has taken a lead role in promoting knowledge exchange on ways government agencies can work collaboratively within Australia and internationally. Published in conjunction with the World Health Organisation, the [Adelaide Statement on Health in all Policies](#), 2010, is designed to engage leaders and policy-makers at all levels of government—local, regional, national and international. It emphasizes that government objectives are best achieved when all sectors include health and well-being as a key component of policy development. This is because the causes of health and well-being lie outside the health sector and are socially and economically formed (p.1).

RECOMMENDATION:

Health and medical research strategic directions and priorities focus on a multidisciplinary approach which integrates disciplines both within the health area and links the health sector with areas traditionally seen as outside of health.

How can we optimise translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing?

(Terms of Reference 9, Ways in which the broader health reform process can be leveraged to improve research and translation opportunities in preventative health and in the primary, aged and acute care sectors, including through expanded clinical networks, as well as ways in which research can contribute to the design and optimal implementation of these health reforms)

The efficient translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing outcomes requires research design to be relevant and responsive to the needs of particular people or target groups. As such, women’s health advocates have long argued for broad strategies to raise awareness of the gendered nature of health and the need for a gendered approach to research, policy development, program design and implementation. People’s experience of health and wellbeing is shaped by the context of their life, including health determinants such as gender, age, disability, ethnicity, socio economic status, sexual orientation and geography. While decisions need to be made about which health determinants are most relevant to a given research group at a particular time, HWHC supports the statement made by the [World Health Organisation Commission on Social Determinants of Health](#), ‘taking action to improve gender equality in health and to address women’s rights to health is one of the most direct and potent ways to reduce health inequalities and ensure effective use of health resources.’

A gendered approach to research means applying a gender analysis framework and gender assessment tools in the development of the research project. The aim of a gender analysis framework is to ensure

any differences are anticipated and the research outcomes are focused on achieving gender equity. [Women's Health Victoria](#) offer a model containing three components: gender data, gender impact assessment and gender awareness raising. A gender assessment tool, rather than offering a detailed analysis, is a rapid assessment of gender responsiveness of the project and indicates where gender responsiveness can be improved. Governments across the world such as Canada and the United Kingdom, along with Australian states Victoria and New South Wales, are among those leading in the area of gender equity in health and utilising gender analysis to improve outcomes in research, policy and program delivery.

RECOMMENDATION:

Health and medical research must include a gender analysis framework and gender assessment tool.

In the context of the current health care reform process, optimising the translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing, requires a commitment to broader preventative health strategies aimed at addressing the social determinants of health.

The main documents guiding the reform process, [A National Health and Hospitals Network for Australia's Future](#), and [Building a 21st Century Primary Health Care System](#), do not contain preventative health strategies. The third relevant document, [The National Preventative Health Strategy](#), does endorse a social model of health and contains preventative health strategies, however, here too strategies are not broad enough to change the social determinants of health outcomes and focuses on the specific issues of tobacco, alcohol and obesity. The National Preventative Health Strategy falls short by not recommending research into the cultural context in which drinking, smoking and obesity occurs in Australia.

The emphasis on hospitals and primary allied health services appears to overlook the preventative health focused work that community based organisations, such as women's health centres, do. Furthermore, other preventative health strategies engaged by women's health centres, such as advocacy and lobbying are not recognised in any of the documents mentioned above. It is unclear where preventative health organisations are situated in the context of the current health reform process. There are suggestions that the newly established Medicare Locals will do some health promotion and prevention work but there appears to be little detail. A commitment to increasing research, policy and program development in the area of preventative health is urgently needed. Research is also required into the effects of the broader health care reform process on community based preventative health care organisations along with the consequent impacts on access to services.

RECOMMENDATION:

Optimising the translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing requires a commitment to broader preventative health strategies aimed at addressing the social determinants of health.

Health and medical research focus on the effects of the broader health care reform process on community based preventative health care organisations.