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**The Australian Association of Gerontology Inc**

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## **Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia (McKeon Review)**

**Submission prepared by**

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## **Introduction**

As the leading professional body supporting ageing research, the Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) believes that building a robust evidence base in ageing research is essential to ensuring the health and wellbeing of older Australians, both now and in the future. With the anticipated ageing of Australia's population that will see up to a quarter of Australians aged 65 or over by 2050, it is important that we identify the health and medical challenges associated with an ageing population through appropriate multidisciplinary ageing research, as well as focus on the translation of research into policy and practice with the aim of best practice outcomes to improve the life of older Australians. This is supported by a number of government reports, including the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council report entitled "Promoting Healthy Ageing in Australia", the Australian Government's "Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda", and more recently, the Productivity Commission's report on "Caring for Older Australians".

Moreover, in its 2010-12 Strategic Plan, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) identified ageing and health as a key area of focus, stating that: "maintaining health as we age is an important social and economic objective. NHMRC will focus on research, evidence translations, and capacity building in the care and support of ageing Australians and provide the evidence to underpin the most effective services supporting prevention of ill-health, improved quality of life and promotion of well-being".

Within this context, it was noted that the current terms of reference for the McKeon Review acknowledges that the burden of disease has altered over the last two decades, with chronic diseases associated with ageing and mental illness being the leading causes of morbidity and mortality. With the ageing of the population resulting in an ever increasing need to focus on age-specific research to improve the health and wellbeing of older Australians, the AAG believes that greater emphasis needs to be placed on:

- building capacity in the ageing research sector by way of targeted funding programs supporting ageing research,
- the development of a National Ageing Research Agenda,
- support for skills development and career opportunities for emerging researchers, and
- mechanisms to support multi-disciplinary research networks and the effective translation of research into policy and practice.

While programs such as the Australian Government's *Ageing Well, Ageing Productively* Research Program have been useful in terms of advancing an ageing research agenda, a broader, more structured ageing research program that promotes collaborative, cross-disciplinary research and supports skills development and career opportunities for emerging researchers is required to ensure that the research community has the capacity to keep pace with the rapid changes expected of an ageing population.

The AAG appreciates the opportunity to comment on the McKeon Review and looks forward to seeing the release of the final report later in 2012.



### Funding and Capacity for Ageing Research

To date, funding for ageing research, other than for dementia research, has been inadequate when compared to the high cost investment in disease specific research. Increased funding for ageing research is essential if Australia is to develop the evidence-base required for the development and implementation of effective and efficient aged care services, and to promote healthy and productive ageing. In particular, the McKeon Review should consider:

- 1) Investigator driven research funded by major nationally competitive grants schemes through the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Australian Research Council (ARC). These schemes enable innovative, rigorous and novel research into mechanisms and effects of biological, behavioural and social factors of ageing and interventions affecting experiences and outcomes for older people. Such research is important for developing new approaches to ageing and aged care programs and improving the lives of older Australians.
- 2) Targeted research funded through nationally competitive grants schemes and funding rounds. These processes also allow for rigorous and novel research addressing areas of identified priority. Such targeted approaches help to ensure more comprehensive knowledge generation in areas of specific need and importance.

Research into ageing and aged care cuts across traditional academic disciplines and does not fit well within the disease or body-systems based models adopted within a number of funding mechanisms, including community grants which are often targeted towards a particular condition (e.g., Alzheimer's disease). For instance, the NHMRC grant panels for 2010 did not include a panel for multi-disciplinary ageing research or research into aged care. Given the importance of ageing and aged care research within the context of an ageing population, we argue that the NHMRC should include a panel to review multi-disciplinary grants in ageing and aged care, including appropriate experts with experience in such research.

Moreover, with the notable exception of Alzheimer's disease and research into other dementias, much disease focused research funded under existing grants schemes systematically excludes older people. Consequently, very little is known about best practices for caring for older people with chronic and complex conditions, and with increasing degrees of frailty. For example, the National Mental Health Survey excluded people over the age of 85 years, and, as a consequence, very little is known about the prevalence of depression and anxiety in old age.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there is also almost no information available on the health of older indigenous peoples with the exception of a few specific studies in selected communities, such as the Kimberley Indigenous Cognitive Assessment study, the Lungurra Ngoora service model project, and the Koori Growing Old Well study.

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<sup>1</sup> Haralambous B, Lin X, Dow B, Jones C, Tinney J, Bryant C. (2009), *Depression in older age: A scoping study*. Report to beyondblue.



In 2004, the NHMRC and the ARC did call for submissions to advise and refine research themes in the area of Ageing Well and Ageing Productively, reflecting national research priorities. These grants were awarded to six projects which concluded at the end of 2011. A second round of Ageing Well, Ageing Productively research grants, or some similar research program targeted towards ageing research, has not been announced. The AAG believes that a second round of Ageing Well, Ageing Productively research grants would add considerable depth to the evidence-base and be of great benefit to policy makers dealing with the complexities of an ageing population.

### **Translating Research into Policy and Practice**

Presently, there is an overemphasis by the NHMRC and other funding bodies on publications being the primary outcome of research, rather than a focus on practical implementation of research. To ensure that research results in effective outcomes to improve the lives of older Australians, there is a need for translating ageing research into meaningful policy and practice outcomes. This requires funding to be built into the grant application process to allow researchers to engage with relevant stakeholders, including consumers, service providers, practitioners, researchers and policy makers, to identify key areas of research and models of best practice, as well as incorporating mechanisms for disseminating and translating research findings effectively to increase the uptake and application of knowledge by policy makers and health care professionals.

Moreover, where new models of practice have been shown to be effective in research studies, which by their very nature are conducted in very controlled situations and limited service contexts, they should be rolled out gradually accompanied by rigorous evaluation, the results of which are then used to progressively improve the model. This would ensure that applied research is able to be effectively translated into best practice outcomes.

Translational research is itself an area worthy of substantive investment and scholarly activity. Health research needs to focus on the unacceptable gap between our unprecedented knowledge of diseases and the implementation of that knowledge. Directed and innovative research is needed to analyse the causes of this situation and to point toward solutions at the global and local levels, both within and outside the health and aged care sector<sup>2</sup>.

To support the formative evaluation of new models of practice, health and aged care service providers should be encouraged by way of funding incentives to attract high-calibre researchers to undertake focussed and relevant research to improve systems and services for older people. Working directly with the service sectors would allow researchers to have a more in-depth understanding of the needs of older people and care providers, as well as the research needs and specialist research methods for service improvement.

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<sup>2</sup> Sanders, D. & Haines, A. (2006), Implementation Research Is Needed to Achieve International Health Goals. *PLoS Med* 3(6): e186.



### **Academic Status of Ageing Research**

Given negative societal attitudes towards ageing and the multi-factorial nature of research into ageing, multi-disciplinary ageing research does not have a high status within the academic arena. Gerontology's prominence in research circles has been further eroded by the recent introduction of the ARC's Excellence of Research in Australia (ERA) initiative, which is currently used to assess quality of research in Australian higher education institutions and which will drive funding allocations. Assessments within the ERA scheme are based on the relative performance of research outputs (peer reviewed publications) within defined disciplines or "Fields of Research".

Ageing research is at a distinct disadvantage compared to other disciplines within health and medical research in that there is no specific field of research code for gerontology and it therefore cannot be judged within its own discipline. In contrast, fields of research such as nursing, and complementary and alternative medicine, have been advantaged within the ERA scheme by having their own research field. A recent specific consequence of the lack of a code for ageing was that very few gerontology journals received an A or A\* (best) rating during the last ERA round, despite their high standard within the field of ageing, and having a much higher impact factor and citation index than A\* journals in other fields. This poor ranking has been both a discouragement to publishing in ageing research journals, and, ultimately, a discouragement to people undertaking ageing research. While we accept this system has now been abandoned we remain concerned the revised approaches may continue to disadvantage gerontology due to the lack of recognition of the research field.

There will also be further implications for funding of research into ageing and aged care. Researchers who work in ageing will not be able to effectively compete for funding grants on the basis of their track record due to artificially lower rankings relative to other researchers working in different fields.

### **Career Opportunities for Ageing Researchers**

In addition to the need for more accessible and targeted research funding, there is an urgent need to build Australia's workforce capacity in ageing research. A strong research and development focus, supporting skills development and career opportunities for emerging researchers in ageing will be a national resource in addressing the health and medical needs of the ageing population over the coming decades. For successful research outcomes, it will be necessary to harness all the existing expertise as well as promoting the development of additional expertise.

Importantly, as already indicated, this research capacity should be invested in both academic and service sectors and should facilitate effective collaborations, skill sharing and knowledge transfer. Such partnerships ensure a well educated ageing research workforce that is capable of undertaking timely and relevant health and medical research around the needs of an ageing population.



## **National Ageing Research Agenda**

The paucity of evidence on particular topics relevant to the health and wellbeing of older Australians was noted in the Productivity Commission's recent report on "Caring for Older Australians", as was the need for stronger research and a better evidence base to inform policies and test and evaluate programs and proposed reforms. However, the report did not recommend a mechanism for prioritising research to ensure that funding can be directed in a timely fashion to addressing the questions that government, policy makers, care providers, care professionals, older people and the community more generally, agree are the most critical.

Maintaining health as we age is an important social and economic objective. The goal of ageing well is to increase the probability that people will remain physically, mentally and socially active, and to delay the onset and improve the management of chronic conditions, disability and subsequent need for care as they age. A research agenda will contribute to achieving this goal by setting the foundations for a robust evidence base to inform policy and practice outcomes.

The AAG believes the best mechanism for identifying critical areas of ageing research would be the development, and regular updating, of a National Ageing Research Agenda with broad consultation and input from all key stakeholders. Such an approach could build on the achievements of earlier strategies and government funded programs, including the Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda, the ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well, and the Ageing Well Ageing Productively Research Grants program, all of which were valuable for supporting the ageing research sector and in assisting to build a robust evidence-base, but which are no longer in effect and have not been replaced.

In October 2011, the AAG and the NHMRC hosted a workshop entitled "Progressing Australia's Research Agenda on Ageing Well". Over 40 researchers from AAG Collaborating Centres, including the Dementia Collaborative Research Centres, recipients of NHMRC/ARC Ageing Well Ageing Productively grants, several government agency representatives and consumer advocacy groups, participated in discussions aimed at informing an agenda for ageing research. Given the McKeon Review's terms of reference, feedback from this NHMRC/AAG workshop is timely. One of the key recommendations from the report was continued collaboration between AAG and NHMRC and key stakeholders in developing a national ageing research agenda that considers research priorities for Australia and the region, and that allows Australia to take advantage of global initiatives in ageing.

Topics suggested for a research agenda covered a range of sectors, issues and population groups and have been categorised into:

- a) Biology and physiology of ageing,
- b) Health problems of advanced old age,
- c) Psychosocial and behavioural factors and issues,
- d) Economic and environmental factors and issues,
- e) Health services research, and



- f) The Community and special population groups.

The AAG will continue to work with the NHMRC to develop a National Ageing Research Agenda that will assist the NHMRC to meet their strategic objectives in the areas of ageing.

### **Aged Care Data Sets**

Improving access to aged care data sets is also an area that the AAG feels is important for the McKeon Review to address. The AAG acknowledges that the Productivity Commission's recommendation for a national "clearinghouse" administered through the proposed Aged Care Regulation Commission with responsibility for coordinating data collection, including the adoption of common definitions, measures and collection protocols, and making data publicly available for research and evaluation, would, provide an effective solution to the difficulties that currently inhibit the use of aged care data for research. However, the AAG believes that such an agency should also be sufficiently resourced to be able to itself conduct analyses to address critical questions concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of aged care services and monitor outcomes on an ongoing basis once the routine collection of outcome data is established. This would ensure that the most is made from the substantial investment in collecting data and also enhance the capacity of the ageing research sector. The AAG has published a Position Statement on access to aged care datasets,<sup>3</sup> a copy of which is at Appendix A.

### **Ageing Research Networks**

The capacity for ageing research is, however, not only invested in academic research centres. In recent years, many more provider organisations, having come to appreciate the value of research and wishing to contribute to the development of the aged care evidence-base, have employed researchers as permanent staff or as contractors to undertake specific projects or evaluations. While the AAG acknowledges the importance of independence in aged care policy research and evaluation, there are also advantages to having an internal evaluator or internally driven research, for example: understanding of the service and program context; access to, and knowledge of, all potential data sources; and, a feeling of ownership of the process and hence the findings by the organisation. This latter fact is more likely to result in the findings being directly translated into organisational policy and practice.

The AAG supports the concept of organised networks of researchers and providers who can share knowledge and skills, and, with input from other key stakeholders such as older people themselves, identify and conduct research that is most likely to lead to policy and practice change. The ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well was such a network that made a significant contribution to building ageing research capacity, but its funding was time limited. The AAG believes

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Association of Gerontology (2010), Standardising Access to Administrative Datasets on Aged Care Programs for Research Purposes. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 29(4), pp.185-89.



that a national ongoing strategy for maintaining and enhancing our ageing research capacity is required.

The AAG has identified 19 collaborating research centres with expertise in ageing research. These centres employ high-profile researchers from across Australia with interests in biological, social, psychological, medical and aged care research (see Appendix B). Together, the centres represent enormous potential for building a robust capacity for large-scale, multi-disciplinary research into ageing and aged care. What is needed now are the resources and organizational structure to enable the centres to work together more effectively to optimise Australia's ageing research potential.

### **Conclusion**

Ageing research must be a major focus within health and aged care reform, and as such should be supported by a dedicated and targeted funding stream that not only enables greater opportunities for collaborative, cross-disciplinary ageing research, but also increases capacity in the sector by supporting skills development and career opportunities for researchers. Any research program will also need to have input from a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that research is policy and practice relevant, therefore, support for mechanisms encouraging multi-disciplinary research networks and the effective translation of research into policy and practice is also required.

Furthermore, the AAG strongly believes that a National Ageing Research Agenda should be developed to identify gaps in the evidence-base, conduct horizon scanning to identify medium and longer term research needs, and provide a broad, multi-disciplinary framework for gerontological research. The research agenda will also take into account research conducted overseas to avoid unnecessary replication, as well as identifying issues that are unique to Australia requiring investigation. A National Ageing Research Agenda, responsive to the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population, would also support the Government's policy objectives related to ageing and aged care, ensuring policies and programs were in-line with latest research findings.