WHY AUSTRALIA NEEDS THE MEDICAL RESEARCH FUTURE FUND (MRFF)

- The Government’s budget initiative of a $20 billion endowment fund for medical research would have a transformational impact on the long-term future of health and medical research in Australia, and, through this, the efficiency and effectiveness of the Australian health system.

- Providing annual disbursements of $1 billion by 2022-23, the MRFF would effectively double the Government’s annual investment in health and medical research (currently ~$800 million per annum) over the next decade.

- The McKeon review of the Australian health and medical research sector—commissioned by the previous Government and released in 2013 to bipartisan support at the Federal level—recommended a doubling of the Government’s investment in medical research.

- The protection of future medical research funding through an endowment fund, and the growth of disbursements over the next decade, is a sensible approach to progressively grow medical research in our hospitals, medical research institutes and universities to help drive the efficiency, effectiveness and long-term sustainability of Australia’s health system.

- Such a boost in the Government’s investment in medical research would not only contribute to the pursuit of new cures. Just as importantly, it would:
  - reduce the burden of disease on the community, our health system and our economy
  - improve the effectiveness and efficiency of health services by developing better policies, procedures, technologies and medicines; and
  - improve the lives and livelihoods of the community, particularly our most disadvantaged and chronically ill, by helping them to prevent, manage or overcome illness.

- Health and medical research is not just about researchers in lab coats; it includes understanding the prevalence and factors leading to disease, investigating the effectiveness of preventative health strategies, clinical trials of pioneering drugs, and testing and implementing new procedures and practices in the clinic and community.

- There is a clear economic benefit from health and medical research, including:
  - curtailing of health costs;
  - growing Australia’s medicines industry, worth $4 billion in annual exports; and
  - attracting private investment to Australia and creating high-value jobs.

- It is important to have an active medical research sector in Australia:
  - Hospitals with active research provide more effective health care, have access to pioneering clinical trials, and attract the brightest, pioneering health professionals.
  - Embedding research in healthcare provides the capacity to be abreast of, tailor and implement innovations from elsewhere in our hospitals and primary health services.
  - Solutions to health problems specific to Australians (e.g. Indigenous health issues, tropical infectious diseases) require an Australian-based research effort.
  - Understanding the prevalence of health conditions and risk factors in the community, and devising preventative strategies for an Australian context require a local research effort.
  - Safeguarding the community from emerging health risks (e.g. dengue fever)
  - Access Economics estimates that every $1 invested in Australian health and medical research generates an average return of >$2 in health benefits to the nation.
MRFF funding sources

- The health and medical research sector recognises concerns in the community (including among researchers themselves) about using a Medicare co-payment to fund the MRFF.

- However, should the establishment of the MRFF be prevented due to its linking to the Medicare co-payment, it would be a huge loss to the community, particularly those suffering from chronic disease, who are often the most disadvantaged in our communities.

- We also acknowledge sensitivities around what was otherwise a tough budget for many sectors, including other areas of research.

- Should the MRFF be supported in the Senate, we would advocate for it to have a substantial ‘translational’ focus, providing funding to better convert research findings into improved disease prevention strategies, diagnostics, medicines and treatments that have a direct impact on health outcomes and drive a more effective and efficient health system.

- It should also support initiatives that improve health system policy and procedures, and facilitate the implementation of the latest advances in healthcare in Australia’s health system.

- We would also advocate for the MRFF to be broad in focus, supporting multi-disciplinary research, including areas such as bioengineering and biostatistics.

- The MRFF would include a transition to longer-term grants that would provide job security to researchers and allow them to focus on their research itself instead of excessive paperwork applying for grants, which currently occupies up to a third of their time.

Examples of Australian successes in health and medical research

As former Australian of the Year Sir Gus Nossal recently noted in The Conversation, there are five Australian medical research success stories we should all know, and they did not include Dr Fiona Wood’s use of “spray-on skin”, the Cochlear Implant or the Gardasil vaccine. They were:

1. The use of lithium as a treatment for mania.
2. The link between analgesic use and severe kidney disease.
3. The discovery of colony stimulating factors’ (CSFs) role in restoring white blood cell counts to normal post-chemotherapy. More than 20 million cancer patients have received CSFs.
4. The development of a “continuous automatic positive airways pressure kit”, or CPAP, to prevent sleep apnoea sufferer’s upper airway from closing.
5. Proving an increase in folate consumption during pregnancy reduces spina bifida.

All of these discoveries were the result of small-scale research by scientists in Australian labs, the sort of research the MRFF would fund by scientists who would be able to focus on their important subject matter instead of being concerned with funding applications and a lack of job security.

Wellcome Trust and its impact on health and medical research

The Wellcome Trust, a global charitable foundation, is analogous to the MRFF and what it could achieve in the sense that it also operates via an endowment fund of £14.5 billion (approximately AUD$26 billion) and is dedicated to improving human health.

Some health and medical research successes resulting from Wellcome Trust funding include:

- The sequencing of one-sixth, and later one-third of the human genome
- Development of a technique for mapping the function of individual nerve cells and their synaptic connections in the brain. Knowing which cells are connected, and how information flows through circuits in the brain, is essential to a fuller explanation of how our brains work and what goes wrong in conditions as diverse as schizophrenia and stroke.
- Studies of gene expression in blood cell development and clinical disorders linked to abnormal blood cell activity. Findings feed into better diagnostic tools and improved treatments.
ABOUT AAMRI

The Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI) is the peak body representing health and medical research organisations across Australia. Our members are not-for-profit research organisations that, together, address practically every aspect of human health and disease. The majority of our member organisations are ‘independent’ medical research institutes (MRIs)—independent mission-driven charities co-located with hospitals and healthcare providers in order to help drive innovation in healthcare. Collectively, AAMRI’s members employ over 10,000 staff and students and have an annual turnover of over $1 billion.