

Best and Brightest: Advancing Medical Research

MRI sector funding



Science | Innovation | Health and medical research

Medical researchers will not achieve the medical breakthroughs possible if we don't fix the funding system.

We don't pretend this is easy to fix. We need to improve how the NMHRC operates. We need equitable funding for indirect costs. We need the full capitalisation of the Medical Research Future Fund. We need policy measures and workplace initiatives that will support boosting commercial returns from research. We need access to ARC grants. You need more support writing your grant application.

It will require harnessing the community's strong support for your work and effective lobbying of government.

There's a need for a workforce model that ensures both the sustainability and agility of the sector while not breaking the bank.

By working together, we can advocate for investment and structural reforms, better policies and build a strong foundation for collaboration that will ensure the MRI sector plays the key role it should in maximising health outcomes over the coming decade. We must make sure the funding model delivers research excellence, a strong return on the public research dollar alongside a reasonable level of job security for our best and brightest researchers.

The Best and Brightest report found that the way the sector is funded gives rise to almost all the serious problems facing the MRI sector.

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Grant-based funding

Professional Scientists Australia understands the frustration researchers in the MRI sector feel with existing grant-based funding – excessive time spent on grant applications, low success rates and precarious work arrangements. Each of these areas is primarily determined by NHMRC policies – what the report told us was that they should be recognised as the key funding-related issues they are for both researchers and the sustainability of the MRI sector workforce.

MRFF

The MRFF is the most important funding initiative in the Australian health and medical research sector in decades. Professionals Scientists Australia is a strong supporter of the MRFF which when fully capitalised at \$20 billion will contribute \$1 billion per annum to health and medical research. We'll continue to call for full capitalisation of the MRFF to \$20 billion by 2019-20 as projected in the federal budget - and we'll push for incentives to be built into investment decisions that help position the sector for the future.

Indirect research costs

Urgent reform to the way indirect costs are funded is needed to resolve the current complex and inequitable arrangements.

The Watt report recommended that the Department of Health and NHMRC work together to resolve the current inequities:

Given the inconsistencies, the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Health should work to resolve the current complex and seemingly inequitable indirect cost support arrangements to determine how to achieve a level playing field for researchers that is independent of their host institution (p.15).

We need to push for the level playing field.

Access to Australian Research Council funding

MRIs are currently at a disadvantage because they cannot directly apply for funding in the enabling sciences such as mathematics, bioinformatics, engineering and genetics through the ARC. Limited access to ARC funding is an issue because the best opportunities for new frontiers in health and medical research are likely to be at the intersection of research undertaken by the medical research sector (funded by the NHMRC) and the enabling sciences (funded by the ARC). We need to ensure proper MRI access to ARC funding.

In summary

The evidence is overwhelming – these are serious and complex issues that can't just be solved at the workplace level. This is the rationale for us working constructively and cooperatively with employers, governments and other stakeholders to find solutions to the big picture issues. It's imperative that the views of the researchers themselves inform policy and decision-making.

There's a need for consultation and collaboration that ensures both the sustainability AND agility of the sector while not breaking the bank. While the MRFF and the National Innovation and Science Agenda promise a way forward, we need to make sure that researchers' livelihoods are not left to the mercy of the existing funding bureaucracy.

By working together, we can advocate for investment and structural reforms, better policies and build a strong foundation for collaboration that will ensure the MRI sector plays the key role it should in maximising health outcomes over the coming decade. We must to make sure the funding model delivers research excellence, a strong return on the public research dollar alongside decent jobs for our best and brightest researchers.

