



**Professional  
Scientists  
Australia**

**SUBMISSION TO THE MEDICAL  
RESEARCH FUTURE FUND  
CONSULTATION FOR THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL RESEARCH  
AND INNOVATION STRATEGY**

JUNE 2016

[WWW.PROFESSIONALSAUSTRALIA.ORG.AU/MRI](http://WWW.PROFESSIONALSAUSTRALIA.ORG.AU/MRI)



## BACKGROUND

Professionals Australia thanks you for the opportunity to participate in this consultation as part of the Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy being developed to guide the Medical Research Advisory Board in its investment decisions. It is understood that the funding will aim to address medical research priorities, drive innovation, improve delivery of health care, boost the efficiency and effectiveness of the health system and contribute to economic growth.

In addition, it is our understanding that the strategy should:

- be practical and economically responsible;
- detail where investment is needed, in what areas investment is proven to have greatest impact and how it addresses current challenges;
- be informed by the recommendations of the 2013 McKeon Review, most critically embedding research into health care to maximise health outcomes and deliver maximum economic value;
- consider a strategic approach to health and medical research investment in the broader context of the National Innovation and Science Agenda, most critically generating growth, gaining greater returns from publicly-funded research and increasing collaboration between industry and research sector; and
- help translate research findings into clinical practice.

The objective of Professional Scientists Australia's submission to this consultation is to emphasise how the MRFF strategy and priorities have the potential to help drive positive change in the Medical Research Institute (MRI) sector workforce. In this sense, our proposals relate to "Enhancing and sustaining the research workforce" listed as a current challenge in Figure 1 – Building blocks for the Australian Health and Medical Research and Innovation Strategy set out in the MRFF Call for Submissions (p.6).

## MRI SECTOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Researchers working in MRIs endure heavy workloads, long hours of work and insecure employment - but they do so because they are passionate about their specialist research area – their commitment is the bedrock of this highly-trained specialist workforce. We understand the frustration of these researchers with existing grant-based funding and suggest that embedding a range of strategic investment selection criteria in the funding assessment process would support positive and strategic workforce development. Adopting selection criteria that incentivise and reward positive workforce development initiatives by researchers' host institutions would contribute to not only maximising health outcomes, economic value and research excellence, but would also drive workforce development in line with current strategic priorities and help address the frustrations of researchers as part of the assessment process.

We hope that the development of selection criteria for MRFF investment decisions is an opportunity to improve existing funding practices that contribute to problems in the MRI sector workforce. Ultimately, these researchers are the key to future national prosperity – integrating the needs of the MRI sector workforce in investment selection criteria would mean the MRFF could play a vital role in supporting the transformation of the workforce,

positioning it for future opportunities and addressing some of the systemic issues that now impact the sustainability of the sector. To fail to see that the MRFF investment selection strategy and priorities could positively impact workforce development would be a missed opportunity - the imperative is doubly urgent as the new funding model is developed so the MRFF does not simply reproduce the problems that characterise existing research funding models.

### We recommend the following:

1. building into MRFF investment selection criteria reward recognition for participation or investment in gender equity, leadership and management capability and business entrepreneurship initiatives by the applicant's host institution;
2. building full funding for the indirect costs of research into the MRFF funding model;
3. ensuring that the Advisory Board formalises a basic policy commitment to longer-term funding cycles to be applied at its discretion.

More specifically, we recommend the following in each of these areas:

## 1(A) - GENDER EQUITY

We suggest that building into investment decision selection criteria for MRFF disbursements a reward for/acknowledgement of participation or investment in gender equity initiatives by the host institution such as:

- the SAGE initiative;
- gender and diversity training for laboratory heads, directors, etc.;
- mentoring and skills training strategies that promote and seek to increase women's participation (to reflect similar provisions of NHMRC);
- proven effective mechanisms for reporting sexual harassment;
- strong or improving representation of women at the laboratory head, senior researcher, director and Board levels;
- holding meetings within school hours;
- ensuring conference practices are inclusive;
- assistance with childcare, career breaks and return to work; and/or
- fellowships for women.

### We also suggest:

- utilising measures of success of publications that do not create a career penalty or disadvantage women who take a career break – for example whole of career publications or best five years of publications rather than publications over the most recent five years, ensuring the application process provides a mechanism for extending the time window over which productivity is assessed;
- rolling funding cycles so those on a career break do not miss the opportunity to apply for funding; and
- in developing the MRFF's administration system, include provision for annual publication of gender breakdown of grants awarded.

In our view, this would provide an incentive for host institutions to take steps that would help address the attrition of women from the MRI sector workforce which has serious implications for workforce sustainability - a serious gap/challenge for the sector in the longer-term.

## 1(B) - STRONG LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CAPABILITY

We suggest that there is a need to build into grant application evaluation criteria for MRFF funding disbursements, a reward for/acknowledgement of participation in initiatives by the host institution to improve management capability in order to improve the health system's people management and financial efficiency by way of targeted skills development in related areas. This approach is in line with the McKeon Review finding that optimising funding allocation and improved outcomes in the health and medical research sector will rely on strong control, transparency and accountability measures with initiatives aimed at preventing inefficiencies and controlling costs fundamental to improvement over the longer-term. Professionals Australia has the view that the development of leadership and management skills of relevant staff is likely to result in significant efficiencies, prevention of waste and potential savings to the health system.

We propose building into investment decision selection criteria, a reward for/acknowledgement of evidence of training for relevant staff in the areas of leadership and management skills in the host organisation. The following are some of the relevant skills development areas that could be incentivised by being included in the grant application evaluation criteria:

- people management;
- leadership and ethics;
- business law;
- research grant management;
- understanding of diversity and equity issues;
- strategic planning;
- financial management;
- project management;
- risk management including health and safety; and
- marketing and communications.

In our view, this would incentivise host institutions to take steps to provide strategically-driven skills development for their workforce. The current lack of training in these areas is a serious gap/challenge for the sector in the longer term.

## 1(C) - BUSINESS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND COMMERCIALISATION-RELEVANT SKILLS

One of the key priorities of the National Innovation and Science Agenda is to improve Australia's rate of collaboration on innovation between industry and researchers, an increased emphasis on providing greater commercial returns from the research sector and increased translation of research to impact generally. To support these aims, we suggest building into grant application evaluation criteria for MRFF funding disbursements some form of acknowledgement of/recognition for commercialisation-related and business development skills development initiatives in the applicant's host institution.

This could include training in the following areas:

- intellectual property;
- commercialisation training;
- technology transfer/business development;
- developing and presenting an investment proposal; and
- media engagement and communications.

Funding for IP protection should also be acknowledged as a key incentive for knowledge production and commercialisation, and where relevant, should be specifically provided for in MRFF funding disbursements. In our view, this approach would incentivise host institutions to take steps to provide skills development for their workforce in the strategically critical areas of business and commercialisation skills to support enhanced entrepreneurship and more effective translation of research to impact – key challenges for the sector in the longer term.

In the drive to reward/incentivise the translation of research into commercial products, what should not be lost is:

- a balance between investment in pure/basic and applied research;
- eligibility for applications from disciplines related to medical research, for example, laser surgery, which is a combination of medical and physics research. The scope for MRFF eligibility should be sufficiently broad to allow for applications from fields not strictly regarded as fields of medical research; and
- funding for non-commercial translation of research to social, environmental and economic outcomes/impact, which can still have major impacts economically through savings in the health system.

## 2 – BUILDING FULL FUNDING FOR THE INDIRECT COSTS OF RESEARCH INTO THE MRFF FUNDING MODEL

We suggest building into the MRFF funding system a solution to the current distorted funding model where the funding of indirect costs attached to research is differentially funded depending on the type of institution making the application. MRFF grants should be tied to full funding of the indirect costs of conducting research. This would mean funding 60 cents in the dollar as indirect cost support to institutions where the research is conducted whether it be a hospital, university or MRI. A failure to do so will mean that successfully securing MRFF funding will be accompanied by a penalty of 60 cents in the dollar for the host institution. Ensuring the funding of indirect, as well as the direct, costs of research would provide for improved research efficiency, commercialisation outcomes, scope for collaboration, institutional capacity to operate strategically, and finally and very importantly, a much needed improvement in job security for researchers in the MRI sector with funds not being sidelined to cover indirect research costs.

## 3 – IN-PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT TO LONGER-TERM FUNDING CYCLES

We suggest that the MRFF Board formalise a basic policy commitment to longer-term funding cycles to be applied at its discretion. This would support enhanced job and income security for researchers while allowing shorter-term disbursements to be allocated to early and mid-career researchers as needed. Such an initiative would help address short-term cyclical funding operating as a disincentive to the next generation of researchers considering working in the MRI sector and causing many to leave to seek research roles in a less precarious employment environment. Building capacity for the future, attracting the next generation of researchers to the MRI sector and the attrition of particular segments of researchers are each key challenges for the health and medical research workforce.

