

## Australia's Draft National Science and Research Priorities

Response to the Consultation, September 2023

### Introduction

Research Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission.

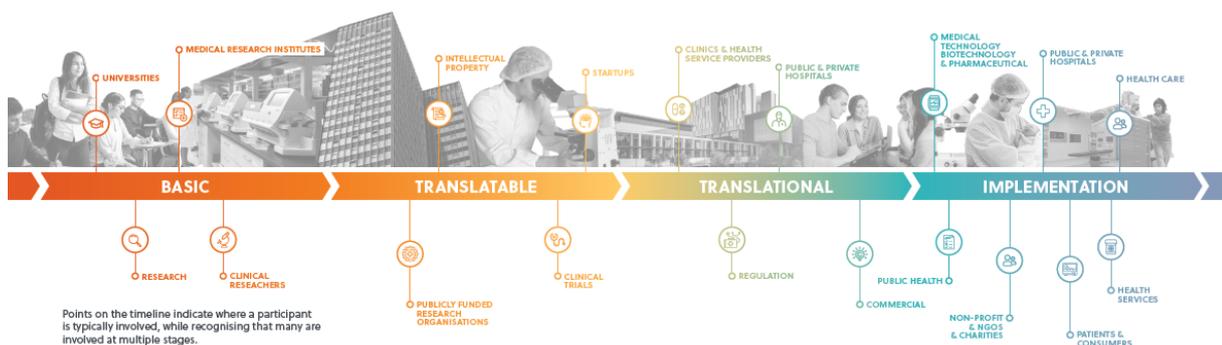
As the national peak body for Australian health and medical research and innovation, our response to the consultation is restricted to *Priority 2: Supporting Healthy and Thriving Communities*.

Our submission broadly corresponds to the question posed in the consultation paper, with some additional comments about the Objectives and the Aims.

It is important the role of research in helping deliver better outcomes for Australia is placed in the context of the other resources required to apply the research in our health system and population more broadly. In respect of Priority 2, responsibility for much of this lies with our Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, through the health system and public health programs they provide, and through the provision of other services and programs which affect the social and environmental determinants of health and wellbeing.

Research Australia's submission also emphasises the importance of alignment with other national strategies, in particular the National Strategy of Health and Medical Research (under development), disease specific strategies (e.g. prevention, obesity, mental health) and with research funding bodies.

### Research Australia represents the entire Health and Medical Research and Innovation pipeline



## The draft priorities intend to identify specific challenges facing the country that will require multidisciplinary and multisector efforts to address. Do they achieve this objective? How can we improve them?

Research Australia submits that Priority 2; Supporting Healthy and Thriving communities is not of itself a specific challenge. There is a number of challenges listed in the consultation paper as having been highlighted by feedback:

- equitable access to healthcare, wherever someone is based
- caring for an ageing population and people's desire to live in their own home for longer
- intersecting effects of disability and poor health on overall wellbeing
- preventing disease
- reducing rates of chronic conditions
- improving mental health
- collecting and curating data to support better wellbeing outcomes.

Research Australia agrees that these are all genuine challenges that require multidisciplinary and multi sector efforts to address them. We also agree that they are all important challenges, and that addressing these will significantly improve the health and wellbeing of the Australian population.

Research has a key role to addressing these challenges although is not, of course, the sole answer. Undertaking the right research, and then following through on the implementation of new evidence-based approaches to the delivery of care and public health programs and changes to the environment are essential to actually delivering better outcomes. The science is just the start.

## The Objectives

The consultation paper has not specifically sought feedback on the objectives:

- Lead on preventive health
- Support healthy communities
- Ensure equitable access to care.

As with the challenges, one overall comment on the objectives is that these cannot be achieved by science alone. The objectives require the application of science, as evidence-based models of care, interventions and health programs in our communities and environment. Objectives for the Science Priorities need to focus on the contribution science can make to greater health and wellbeing, rather than promising to deliver them.

### Lead on preventive health

'We will be leaders in preventive health, empowering people to make choices in their care'. By 'leaders' do we mean 'world leaders'? Or do we mean that the scientific community in Australia will lead preventive health efforts in Australia?

Perhaps a better objective for a science priority would be 'We will be world leaders in preventive health research'.

## Support healthy communities

It is unclear what differentiates this objective from 'Lead on preventive health', 'Support...' also seems to lack ambition.

**Research Australia submits what is missing is an objective related to improving health and wellbeing through new advances in the diagnosis and treatment of disease and the delivery of healthcare.**

## Ensure equitable access to care

There is certainly scope for health and medical research to identify means of improving equitable access to care. Health services research and health economics, for example, are key to research informed policy change, and new modes of care. Similarly, digital health research aids development of new technologies. However, Research cannot **ensure** equitable access to care.

## The Aims

The consultation paper has not specifically sought feedback on the Aims:

- Australia's science and research will improve the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of all Australians by developing and adopting integrative, holistic approaches for health and disability (Lead on preventive health).
- Australia's science and research will understand the diverse and unique social and environment drivers of health and wellbeing in Australian communities (Support healthy communities).
- Australians will have healthy brains and improved mental health throughout life (Support healthy communities).
- Australia's science and research will develop and adopt tools and approaches to improve access to health and wellbeing services for all Australians. These will be appropriate for peoples' backgrounds and circumstances (Ensure equitable access to care).

The first Aim is unclear. Is research to develop and adopt integrative, holistic approaches to the conduct of research? If so what would this look like? If this is about the development and adoption of integrative, holistic approaches to preventive health, then research can develop them, and can even support their adoption, but it is the health system that has to adopt the measures.

The second aim that 'Australia's science and research will understand the diverse and unique social and environment (sic) drivers of health and wellbeing in Australian communities' is relatively clear. It seems to relate well to the objective of 'Lead on Preventive Health' as a foundational requirement to developing measures to improve preventive health measures. (It is linked in the text to 'Support healthy communities'.)

The third Aim, for 'healthy brains and improved mental health' is worthy, but seems a little out of place. There is no explanation as to why mental health and brain function are being singled out. Again, research can provide evidence for new treatments and modes of care but not the delivery of these new interventions, which is what will be required to achieve this aim.

The fourth Aim is clear, and well related to the objective of 'Ensure equitable access to care'.

For major challenges like antimicrobial resistance a 'one health approach' will be necessary encompassing human, environmental and animal health. The same is true of zoonotic diseases. It is unclear how these challenges might span multiple National Science Priorities and their associated aims.

## **Feedback stressed the need to work in partnership with First Nations people to embed First Nations knowledge and knowledge systems in the way we address national challenges. How might governments and the science and research sector best work with First Nations people to achieve this objective?**

Involving First Nations people in efforts to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians is critical. First Nations people need to be involved in identifying the issues to be tackled and the development of research questions. They must be involved in research design and consulted on participation and implementation.

The NHMRC has developed specific ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which complement the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

These guidelines form the basis for the research sector's engagement with First Nations people. If the referendum is successful, health is an obvious area where the Voice should provide advice to the Government to inform both research priorities and the conduct of research.

## **The draft priorities provide a range of critical research paths. How could we refine these research paths, for example, to address immediate challenges?**

Priority 2 identifies three critical areas of research (although not 'research paths' as such):

- Technologies and techniques that will enable an affordable, inclusive, culturally appropriate, and integrated preventive health system for Australia – one that drives positive behaviour changes and leverages fit-for-purpose data and connections to Country, community, and built and natural environments.
- Mechanisms of brain function and repair and how to address deterioration of brain function.
- Social and environmental drivers of ill health and poor mental health and the techniques and practices we can apply to enhance the wellbeing of all Australians at scale.

Technologies and techniques for preventive health is a very broad area. It encompasses technologies such as apps to help individuals adopt healthier behaviours through to population wide (or targeted) screening programs for early detection of disease and/or the increased risk of developing a specific disease. It is difficult to conceive of this as a single area of research.

Mechanisms of brain function and repair and how to address deterioration of brain function is a more specific area and relates clearly to the Aim of 'healthy brains' (although perhaps less so to improved mental health). This is an area where consideration of global research efforts, and identifying how Australia can best complement this research, would be valuable.

Social and environmental drivers of ill health and poor mental health and how to remediate these at scale is a more clearly defined area.

**Research Australia submits refining the research paths for all three of these critical research areas should start with a ‘stocktake’ of what research is currently being undertaken in these areas in Australia and overseas, how this research is being funded so that we avoid further duplication and funding gaps, and the impediments to this research in Australia (e.g. poor demographic data, lack of expertise, lack of funding).** This will inform development of specific research strategies for each area, including attention to pathways for the implementation, scaling and sustaining of new evidence-based interventions.

## **How would you implement the priorities in your organisation or setting? What mechanisms would support implementation?**

As the national peak body for health and medical research and innovation, Research Australia views the national science priorities as an important signal to our sector on emerging government focal points and likely areas of funding priority (noting that the Priorities are not supported by a dedicated funding stream).

The key mechanisms that would support implementation of the priorities is integration with existing health strategies, and the creation of funded research programs that complement the health strategies’ goals for better health.

### **A National Health and Medical Research Strategy**

Research Australia has successfully advocated to the Australian Government for a National Health and Medical Research Strategy. Development of the Strategy was announced by the former Government and the current Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler, has committed to the Government to it. The Strategy is currently under development by the Department of Health.

A National Strategy will set out the evolutionary pathway to transition Australia to a better funding model more focused on health and economic impact. The National Strategy must:

- facilitate coordinated, sustainable investment in research;
- strengthen the connection between research and healthcare; and
- support emerging innovative health industries.

This requires a cross-portfolio and state and federal perspective, and joint investment from federal and state and territory governments, to foster seamless integration of research and healthcare.

The National Science and Research Priorities make no reference to the National Health and Medical Research Strategy.

### **Existing strategies**

In the specific area of preventive health, the Australian Government already has two relevant strategies.

The National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032 identifies research as an enabler. It refers to establishing ‘a systematic approach to the prioritisation of obesity prevention research and evaluation to address key knowledge gaps’ and to accessing ‘funding to evaluate promising and more innovative actions to grow the evidence base and to support the translation of evidence into

action.<sup>1</sup> There is no funding for research and no mechanism for the Strategy to influence existing research funding bodies.

The National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030 identifies research and evaluation as one of the seven enablers of the Strategy. It also lists a host of research related policy achievements to implement by 2030, including 'a systematic approach to prioritisation of preventive health research'; and 'partnership research and interventions with specific population groups... are prioritised'.<sup>2</sup> There is no funding proposed, or any mechanism for influencing existing funding bodies.

In seeking to improve mental health, the Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan commenced in 2017, with an action for the 'National Mental Health Commission to work in collaboration with the National Health and Medical Research Council, consumers and carers, states and territories, research funding bodies and prominent researchers to develop a research strategy to drive better treatment outcomes across the mental health sector'.<sup>3</sup> The National Mental Health Commission published the National Mental Health Research Strategy in 2022. Principle 1 of the Strategy is 'Strengthen Mental Health Research' and actions to do this include:

- 'Targeted funding through government sources to prioritise high-quality research in areas of high need and research gaps ...
- Establish national collaborative networks and shared governance structures to enhance the quality of clinical trials and prevention trials in Australia...
- Encourage research into social determinants of mental health...
- Support and promote research into substance use problems...'<sup>4</sup>

There is no funding attached to these actions nor any mechanism for influencing funding provided by existing agencies.

## **Existing research funding**

Commonwealth Government funding for health and medical research and innovation is provided by several portfolios and multiple different programs. The most significant competitive grant programs are provided by the Department of Health and Ageing through the National Health and Medical Research Council's Medical Research Endowment Account (\$900 million in 2002) and the Medical Research Future Fund (around \$650 million per annum). While not funding medical research per se, around 10% of funding from the Australian Research Council's grant programs (approximately \$80 million per annum) is related to health and medical research, and a significant proportion of the Department of Education's Block Grant funding to universities is related to health and medical research funding.

The research programs of the MREA and the ARC are largely investigator led, responding to grant applications, and are distributed across a broad range of research areas and at various stages from pure basic research to applied research.

The MRFF's funding programs are driven by the Research Strategy and Priorities published by the Australian Medical Research Advisory Board. The Minister for Health is responsible under the Medical Research Future Fund Act for making funding decisions and is required to consider the Strategy and Priorities when doing so.

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia 2022. The National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032. Health Ministers Meeting, Enablers 2.4 and 2.5, page 69

<sup>2</sup> Commonwealth of Australia 2021. National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030, page 43

<sup>3</sup> Commonwealth of Australia 2017. The Fifth National, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan, page 47

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 6

The MRFF operates with a 10 Year Plan that was last updated in 2022. It provides a planned allocation for most of the projected MRFF funding through to 2031-32 against several of initiatives and missions.<sup>5</sup> Some of these are condition specific (mental health, dementia, traumatic brain injury) while others focus more on technology or a mode of delivery (genomics, stem cells, primary care, early to mid-career researchers).

It is not apparent to Research Australia how, or even if, the National Science and Research Priorities or the upcoming National Science Statement will influence these disparate funding programs. Nor is it clear how these funding programs will need to account for the National Science Priorities in their own priority setting process, see for example the MRFF Priorities and Strategy<sup>6</sup>.

**The National Science Statement will explain the role our science systems will play in delivering the priorities and maximising the benefits from science for Australia. How can the following best support the priorities:**

**a. Science agencies**

**b. Science infrastructure**

**c. Australian government science programs**

**d. Domestic and international science relationships.**

We have referred in our above response to the development of a National Health and Medical Research strategy. The Strategy will need to consider how to best integrate the work of science agencies and infrastructure (state and federal), Australian Government Science programs relevant to health and medical research, and international research.

**Research Australia submits the National Science Statement should explain how it will interact and integrate with the National Health and Medical Research Strategy which is currently under development by the Department of Health and Aged Care, and how, if at all, the Science Statement and the Priorities will influence Government investment in health and medical research and science more generally.**

It is also important to note that industry, philanthropy, state governments and higher education also fund health and medical research. It would be valuable to see a reference in the National Science Statement to how the Government intends to enable and leverage the significant role that science funders outside of the Government play in the Australian innovation system.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/medical-research-future-fund-our-10-year-investment-plan?language=und>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/medical-research-future-fund/about-the-mrff/mrff-strategy-and-priorities>

## Conclusion

If the Priorities are to 'set out the "what" and the "why" for Australia's science and research efforts over the next decade', they need to better reflect the Government's ambitions for the nation's society, economy and environment, and the role science can play in achieving these ambitions.

When it comes to health and wellbeing, better alignment of Australia's health and medical research with our national needs and ambitions is critical to making the most of our domestic research and innovation. The National Science and Research Priorities can play an important role in achieving this, but only if they are better integrated with the Australian Government's National Health and Medical Research Strategy, disease-specific health strategies, funding programs and initiatives. We hope this submission has helped explain not only why but how this can be achieved.

We would be pleased to explore any aspect of this submission further; to do so please contact Greg Mullins, Head of Policy [greg.mullins@researchaustralia.org](mailto:greg.mullins@researchaustralia.org) in the first instance.

## About Research Australia

**Our vision:** Health and prosperity through Australian research and innovation.

**Our mission:** Use our unique convening power to maximise the impact of all stages of health and medical research and innovation.

### Our role:

#### Engage

Australia in a conversation about the health benefits and economic value of its investment in health and medical research.

#### Connect

Researchers, funders, healthcare providers and consumers to increase investment in health and medical research from all sources.

#### Influence

government policies that support effective health and medical research and its routine translation into evidence-based practices and better health outcomes.

Established with the assistance of the Federal Government in 2002, Research Australia is the national alliance representing the entire health and medical research (HMR) pipeline, from the laboratory to health consumers and the marketplace. Research Australia works to position Australian HMR as a significant driver of a healthy population and a healthy economy.

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