



16 July 2015

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Re: Medical Research Future Fund Bill 2015 and Medical Research Future Fund (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2015

Curtin University

Dear Committee Secretary

Queensland
University
of Technology

Please find the following submission by the **Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN)** to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee.

RMIT University

By way of introduction, the ATN acknowledges the importance of medical and health research in Australia, noting that:

University of
South Australia

- The footprint of medical and research within the nation's total research effort is large:
 - An estimated \$6.03 billion was spent on health and medical research in Australia in 2011-2012¹;
 - 19% of all Australian research and development (R&D) is spent on health and medical research (total R&D 32.42 billion)
 - 0.38% of GDP was spent on health and medical research (Aust GDP 1.31 billion)²; and
 - The Medical and Health Sciences Field of Research (FoR) accounted for approximately 22% of the research outputs submitted to ERA 2012 – a national stock take of the quality of research at higher education institutions in Australia.

- Australia can and should play a role as a key global contributor to the fields of medicine, health and wellbeing. As a nation we are capable of generating the highest quality research that can have transformative impacts in advancing health and medical technologies and approaches.

- Having a robust and well-resourced medical and health research community in Australia positions us well to evaluate and transfer into Australia those new technologies and knowledge that arise from places outside Australia. It also strengthens our position as valued international research collaborators.

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¹ Using methodology from <http://www.researchaustralia.org/health-medical-research/funding-hmr> applied to the year 2011-2012

² ABS 1345.0 - Key Economic Indicators, 2012

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As such, the ATN welcomes this pledge of support for the Australian research community, and recognises the great potential that the Fund presents. The ATN believe that the quantum of the Fund and the proposed pace at which the funds will be rolled out are of the right magnitude to keep us internationally competitive in this arena of research endeavour. However, we also note that even when the Fund reaches its target balance and annual funding levels, the amount of investment still falls far short of funding the quantum of worthwhile and high quality health and medical related projects which seek funding each year. This means that funding from philanthropic and other sources will still be vitally important.

The ATN wishes to make particular comments on two elements of the MRFF: the scope of the Fund (referring to the current definition of medical research); and matters relating to operationalising the disbursement of funds to recipients.

Scope of the Fund

The ATN urges the Senate to consider a broad and widely inclusive definition of medical research. Specifically, the Fund should be structured to support and encourage **medical, health and supporting technologies**. This Fund represents a unique and timely opportunity to address, through outstanding research, the crippling public health costs which continue to spiral in our nation, and which are set to increase with our ageing population.

In his 2013 *Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia*, McKeon³ noted that the best performing health systems embed research into health delivery, leading to better health outcomes. The ATN believes that the scope of the Fund should embrace this approach, putting high priority on translational research that has lasting community impacts. As such, we recommend the scope of the Fund includes (list not exhaustive) research in the following areas:

- Preventative health
- Health systems research
- Health impacts of social disadvantage
- Health service and delivery research
- Population and behavioural research.

Additionally, the ATN strongly believes that a wide range of supporting technologies, including those stemming from pure sciences should be considered potentially relevant in supporting the aim of improving medical and health outcomes in Australia. As such, the scope of the Fund should make allowance for allocations to relevant fields, as long as applicants can demonstrate a worthwhile and reasonable linkage to health and medical outcomes. These fields could include (again not exhaustive):

- ICT technologies
- data analytics

³http://www.mckeonreview.org.au/downloads/Strategic_Review_of_Health_and_Medical_Research_Feb_2013-Final_Report.pdf

- engineering (particularly advanced devices, nanotechnology and robotics)
- pure sciences where there is demonstrated potential for incorporation into the medical and health fields e.g. physics and chemistry,

Furthermore, the ATN welcomes the range of bodies that have the potential to be recipients of the funding, including industry bodies. Careful thought should be given to design so that the Fund encourages research that would not otherwise have taken place. Also, it will be equally important to recognise that a wide range of medical and health research does not link to marketable or commercial ‘products’ even if the research itself can make a fundamental difference to community health and wellbeing.

The Fund in operation

The ATN welcomes the amendments made in relation to the Bill which provide greater clarity around the decision making and accountability of the MRFF, including the establishment of an independent Advisory Board to develop the Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy and related Priorities.

The ATN supports the principle of five-year strategies as they would afford longer term support for innovation. These strategies and the associated two-year priorities should be developed through wide consultation with the medical sector, commercialisation experts, not-for-profit entities, industry bodies and research institutes. Additionally, more university representatives should be included in the Medical Research Advisory Board, noting that over 70% of all Australian health and medical research output is produced by the higher education sector⁴ and approximately 34% of all research expenditure by the higher education sector is currently being spent on health and medical research (total spend of \$3.27 billion)⁵

The process for allocation/awarding of funds needs better definition. Decision-making should be at arm’s length from the relevant Minister. A rigorous review process by those who understand research and the health and medical fields is essential to the funding decisions. The ATN encourages the Committee to utilise the expertise and past experience of the NHRMC and its processes and administration where possible. However, so as to not subsume or overtake normal NHRMC operations, the ATN recommends that a distinction should be kept between the MRFF and the NHMRC both in terms of governance and operationally.

While the ATN understands the need to keep the remit broad to allow flexibility for the MRFF to fund a wide range of initiatives including government and industry initiatives, careful consideration needs to be given to process and accountability for determining if programmes are consistent with the strategy and priorities as set by the Advisory Board.

⁴http://www.mckeeonreview.org.au/downloads/Strategic_Review_of_Health_and_Medical_Research_Feb_2013-Final_Report.pdf

⁵ ABS 8111.0 - Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2012

The legislation should therefore meet the test of ensuring broad and sensible use of the Fund, with a structure for effective delivery and most importantly, a focus on outcomes.

On the matter of evaluating outcomes, this is an underrepresented issue and a critical one. The best determinant of success will be a robust, rigorous, fair and independent evaluation process. The roll-out of this Fund offers further opportunity as a nation to address the matter of effective evaluation of the impact of research. Assessment of research impact is currently under consideration and the result will be important in providing future evaluation of the success of the MRRF. The ATN suggests that, although there may be a range of appropriate ways to evaluate and administer the Fund, strong evaluation and accountability will be key to judging the impact of the Fund to the benefit of the public.

If you have any queries or would like to discuss this submission further, please do not hesitate to call me on (08) 8302 9135 or via e-mail at renee.hindmarsh@atn.edu.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Renee Hindmarsh". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Renee Hindmarsh
ATN Executive Director