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NHMRC PROJECT GRANT SUCCESS RATE OF JUST 14.9 PER CENT HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR THE GOVERNMENT’S MEDICAL RESEARCH FUTURE FUND

Today’s announcement of a further fall in the already record low success rate of National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grant approvals demonstrates the urgent need for the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) that was announced in the May Federal Budget.

A success rate of only 14.9 per cent for researchers applying for NHMRC Project Grants, the primary funding scheme for health and medical research, means that for the second year in a row, more than four out of five applications have failed, leaving critical health and medical research unfunded. This compares to a success rate of 16.9 per cent last year and 22.8 per cent five years ago.

MRFF Action Group Chairman, Mr Peter Scott, said NHMRC Project Grant applications undergo a rigorous peer review process to ensure that Australia’s most promising research is funded, but unfortunately, the limited funding available means that more than half the applications recommended for award do not receive support.

“This NHMRC grant announcement highlights the absolute need for the MRFF to go ahead at its full proposed capitalisation of $20 billion by 2022, which is expected to deliver $1 billion a year in additional health and medical research funding by 2022,” said Mr Scott, also Chairman of the Baker IDI Heart & Diabetes Institute and Vice Chairman of UBS Investment Banking.

“That may sound like a lot of money, but it will only just bring Australia in line with the OECD average for funding of medical research. Currently Australia invests just 64 per cent of the OECD average in health and medical research as a percentage of GDP.”

Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI) President, Professor Brendan Crabb, said the demand for health and medical research is increasing as Australia’s population ages.

“More than seven million Australians, including almost all people aged 65 years and over, live with a chronic illness such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes or mental health issues,” Professor Crabb said. “This is a time when research simply must be supported to find answers to these intractable and nationally debilitating problems.”

Research Australia Chair Professor Christine Bennett AO said that the research funded by the grants announced today will contribute to every aspect of healthcare, from reducing the prevalence of disease in the community, improved diagnosis, to more effective healthcare.

“By finding new ways to diagnose, treat and even prevent disease we can improve health outcomes and deliver a more efficient health system,” Professor Bennett said. “Only research can make these discoveries possible.”

Professor Bruce Robinson AM, Chair, Group of Eight Universities Deans of Medicine Committee, said this was disheartening news for young clinicians and scientists beginning a career in medical research.

“The MRFF would insulate these bright, committed young Australians from fluctuations in the economy,” Professor Robinson said.

“Ultimately, it will keep them in Australia, researching the health issues that affect us all.”

For interview requests please contact Rebecca Thorpe on 0401 419 590.
MEDICAL RESEARCH FACTS:

- More than 7 million Australians live with a chronic illness. [AIHW]
- More than half of potentially preventable hospitalisations arise from chronic conditions. [AIHW]
- Health and aged care costs, as a proportion of Australian Government expenditure, are expected to almost double by 2050, from 18.5 per cent to 33 per cent of Australian Government expenditure. [Treasury]
- The Australian Government invests 0.075 per cent of GDP in health and medical research, 64 per cent of the OECD average, putting Australia behind countries such as Canada and South Korea. [OECD]
- Federal Government investment in research and development has dropped back to a record low of 0.56 per cent of GDP. [Parliamentary Library]
- Every dollar invested in Australian health and medical research returns on average $2.17 in health benefits. [Access Economics, ASMR]
- Investment in the NHMRC between 2000-2010 is projected to save $966 million in costs to the health system, with a further $6 billion in projected gains linked to increased wellbeing. [Deloitte Access Economics, ASMR]
- The NHMRC grant success rate is progressively decreasing, having dropped from 22.8 per cent just five years ago in 2009. [NHMRC]
- Collectively, Australian researchers spend the equivalent of more than four centuries worth of a researcher's time each year applying for NHMRC Project Grants they will not get. [Herbert, D et al., BMJ Open, 2013],
- Research Australia polling has found 73 per cent of Australians support increased government investment in health and medical research. [Research Australia]

Founding organisations of the MRFF Action Group:

- Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes
- AusBiotech
- Australian Society for Medical Research
- Group of Eight Universities Australia
- Group of Eight Deans of Medicine Committee
- Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand
- Research Australia

Members of the MRFF Action Group:

- Founding Chair: Mr Alastair Lucas, Chairman, Burnet Institute
- Chair: Mr Peter Scott, Chairman, Baker IDI Heart & Diabetes Institute
- Deputy Chair: Mr Matthew Grounds, Chairman, Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute
- Deputy Chair: Mr Ian Smith, Board Member, Baker IDI Heart & Diabetes Institute
- Professor Christine Bennett, Chair, Research Australia
- Professor Brendan Crabb, President, Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes
- Professor Les Field, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), University of New South Wales
- Professor Nicholas Fisk, Executive Dean (Medicine & Biomedical Sciences), University of Queensland
- Professor Doug Hilton, Director, Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research
- Professor Jim McCluskey, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), University of Melbourne
- Dr Chris Roberts, CEO & President, Cochlear Limited
- Professor Bruce Robinson, Chair, Group of Eight Universities Deans of Medicine Committee
- Professor Peter Smith, President, Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand