

Scientists left speechless after proposed changes to Defence Trade Control Act

AAMRI is alarmed at a sweeping proposal from the Department of Defence that would severely impact on international research collaboration.

The Department's proposal is for unprecedented powers to regulate research and the legitimate exchange of knowledge, without justification or consultation with the research sector first.

Not only will researchers in Australia be held back by red-tape and delays as they wait for the associated inspection of their work by the Department of Defence, but such unparalleled power would threaten improved health outcomes and commercialisation of research.

The proposal for the *Defence Trade Control Act* includes controlling supply of any technology, without explanation, and the power to control publication of research in scientific journals, an essential part of the peer-review process.

"International collaborators will potentially look elsewhere if this proposal was taken up," said Professor Tony Cunningham AO, President of the Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI).

"It could harm export industries and cripple overseas research partnerships in areas where Australia is a world leader," he said.

AAMRI has responded to the submission by the Department outlining its concerns over the highly bureaucratic and restrictive proposals.

Worryingly, most researchers had not heard about the changes as invitations to comment have only been extended to those who put forward a submission in a first-round consultation about broader issues relating to the *Defence Trade Control Act 2012*. Many had not commented in the first-round precisely because they felt the Act is working fine and they have nothing further to say, or because they were unaware that the Department of Defence would be proposing sweeping changes to the Act that would materially affect them.

"The combined effect of the proposals would be to hand the Department of Defence the power to control and prevent any technology from being exported," said Professor Cunningham.

"It could do this without warning, reason or just process, and would be able to enforce its powers through proposed warrantless entry to undertake search and seizures."

AAMRI suggests the Department of Defence consult with the sector prior to putting forward extensive proposals to change the *Defence Trade Control Act* and for the whole research community to then be given the opportunity to comment.

We need a better balance between the needs of researchers and the need to ensure sensitive technology is correctly controlled by the Department of Defence. Furthermore, any change to the legislation should be evidence-based and follow meaningful consultation with the sector.

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About AAMRI

AAMRI is the peak body representing medical research institutes across Australia. Our 49 member organisations are international leaders in health and medical research, addressing practically every aspect of human health and disease. Collectively, AAMRI's members represent more than 19,000 staff and students.

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