

## National interest test for research must not become a 'political interest test'

In the wake of the news that 11 Australian Research Council (ARC) grants had been secretly vetoed by the previous Education Minister, a new worrying concept known as the 'national interest test' was announced yesterday by Education Minister Dan Tehan.

The research sector is rightly concerned that the national interest test could become a 'political interest test', with unknown, changeable criteria, and is ignoring the key fact that to qualify for a research grant, researchers already need to prove national and international benefits to expert reviewers.

The President of the Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI), Professor Tony Cunningham AO, said that he is concerned this additional requirement is more about satisfying political interests than national interests.

"This process could lead to research funding decisions being determined not by the benefits they could bring to the nation, but on how they fit with the political objectives of the Government," he said.

Professor Cunningham also said it wasn't yet clear how national interest will be assessed, but it was crucial that it is not assessed by politicians.

"The best way to judge research quality, including the benefits it delivers to the nation, is by allowing experts to make such assessments. This is the process that is already in place."

"Politicians disagree with each other every day on what they see as in the national interest, and it is unfair to expect researchers to be able to second guess what the Minister thinks."

"In medical research it isn't always clear what the outcome is going to be at the start. A researcher might put forward a proposal to study a particular protein without knowing what new treatment this could lead to, and then later this research leads to new vaccines, drugs or medical devices."

The announcement that any future grants vetoed by the Minister following a funding recommendation by the Australian Research Council would be publicly disclosed was cautiously welcomed by Professor Cunningham.

"I'm pleased to see the Minister respond to the sector's concerns about the secret decision to veto research funding to certain projects. However, any further political interference in our research system must stop."

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## About AAMRI

AAMRI is the peak body representing medical research institutes across Australia. Our 50 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.

## AAMRI Members

