

AAMRI 2018 Conference: The Hon Catherine King MP

Transcript of Speech at the AAMRI Annual Dinner

Thanks very much for that introduction Norman and thanks for painting the room red, after the Victorian results, no not quite. Alright, can I start by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. To the association of Australian Medical Research Institutes and your 50 member organisations gathered here in the splendour of this room. I particularly want to acknowledge your outgoing president, Tony Cunningham and of course who is known well to me and of course your incoming president, Vlado Perkovic who of course I always take the opportunity to say as my husband is Croatian that he and my husband share a great delight in Croatians win in the soccer.

They are both tremendous advocates for your sector and I also want to acknowledge federal colleagues who are here with us today and I understand the ACT Minister for health Meegan Fitzharris who's also here with us today, who's doing terrific work here for the health system in Canberra. While I have been to this dinner each year, in recent times it is an honour to be one of the speakers here this evening, it is a slot usually I understand reserved for the Minister for Health so it's good to get in to what I hope is a year early, but nothing taken for granted I would have to say, very seriously.

We are of course less than six months away from the next federal election which must be held by the 18th of May and while Labor does not take anything for granted, it is clear that we are competitive at the next election. So tonight, I do want to take the opportunity to reiterate some of the things that I have said about health and medical research over the five years of my role as shadow health minister and hopefully that will give you a sense of some of Labor's policy thinking and how we will work with you if we are lucky enough to form Government at the next general election.

First of course I do want to start with the Medical Research Future Fund, I want to focus those comments because I know that some in your sector are a little nervous about Labor's approach to the MRFF and I do want to be very clear, Labor voted for the MRFF in Parliament, we support the MRFF in opposition and we will maintain and strengthen the MRFF if we are fortunate enough to form government. I have been saying that - thank you. I have been saying that since the MRFF was announced in the 2014 budget but I think some nervousness has arisen because we've expressed some concerns about the government's implementation of the MRFF particularly around funding announcements and governance, those concerns aren't fatal. If anything, addressing them would in fact strengthen the MRFF and so I want to dwell on both funding and on governance tonight.

On funding, the government originally promised that the MRFF would reach \$20 billion by 2020 and disperse a billion a year by 2023 but those projections as you know, relied on the health cuts in the 2014 budget, the \$7 GP co-payment a \$5 cut to GP rebates an increase to PBS co-payments including for pensioners, a \$1.8 billion dollar cut to public hospitals, all of that was predicated on the budget for the MRFF. Those cuts, would have made frankly, essential healthcare in this nation, more expensive and less accessible for every Australian in the country and so they were pretty quickly rejected by the community and strongly opposed by Labor and the Senate.

Eventually, even the government had to mitigate those cuts themselves and they admitted that the MRFF would now grow more slowly. The government now says on its budget projection for the MRFF will reach \$20 billion dollars by 2021, but that timeline still relies on a massive \$8 billion dollar credit in the 2020 year, the year after the next federal election. So we have repeatedly asked both health and finance portfolios to explain that credit, given the savings measures on which it relied have been rejected by the parliament. We are still waiting on that.

So frankly, we are sceptical that credit will materialise. We will look for it in the mid year economic financial outlook which is the last opportunity the government has to lay down where that will come from, prior to a federal election. That would mean, frankly that the MRFF would grow more slowly than the government is currently claiming it will do. That said, disbursements will continue to increase towards the \$1 billion a year and that is an objective that is shared by both sides of parliament. An investment of that scale, demands that we think carefully about how we make MRFF disbursements and what research we do fund.

On the how, my concerns about MRFF governance are pretty widely known. During parliamentary debate on the legislation, I said "there is no peer review, no independent oversight in the legislation at all which will allow a government to fund its own pet health and medical research projects. Three years later, many people in this room tell me privately that many of those concerns have materialised. I want to acknowledge particularly Professor Ian Frazer, the Australian Medical Research Advisory Board and others in this sector who have been trying to work quietly to uphold the integrity of the fund in trying political circumstances. But I would urge the sector to continue to make it's concerns both to me but also to make those public before the next election. That is the only way that governments and frankly, perspective governments will be convinced to improve and strengthen the governance.

On the wash, we should have of course by guarded by the Australian Medical Research Innovations Strategy for 2016 to 2021. I'm particularly interested in the strategies objectives to embed research evidence in health care policy and in practice improvement and to position the research sector and health system to tackle future challenges. As our health care system faces new and growing challenges, the MRFF is an opportunity to drive innovation across prevention, primary care, hospitals and beyond. I don't see health and medical research as silo or a pillar. I see it as work that should be embedded across our entire health system, to improve the health of all Australians and healthcare in all settings.

In that context, I certainly want to applaud Ian and the AMRAB for the new Australian Medical Research and Innovation priorities for 2018 to 2020. The priorities as I understand it, are predicated on consultations with over a 1,200 stakeholders, so I want to thank everybody who has participated in that process. I particularly want to welcome two priorities, comparative effectiveness research and primary care research. As the priorities note and I quote "healthcare is about choices, knowledge of the benefits and harms of alternate means to prevent, diagnose, treat and to monitor care, can transform health outcomes", the priorities therefore call on and I quote "prioritise primary care research that is led by clinicians, can permeate daily practice, and has potential for scalability". I couldn't agree more and if I'm lucky enough to serve as Minister, I look forward to working with AMRAB and the sector on those priorities in particular.

In the few minutes I have left, I just want to touch briefly on the National Health and Medical Research Council. Parliament made the first appropriation for the council in 1937, more than 80 years ago. It has been and is an extraordinary part of the health landscape in this nation. The appropriation then was for

30,000 pounds, around \$2 million dollars in today's money. The grant application form that year was three pages long. 80 years later the NHMRC granted more than \$877 million in 2017 and the application form I understand, was a bit longer than three pages. The NHMRC has well and truly stood the test of time because of its values, investing in high quality health and medical research and building research capability. Supporting the translation of that research into clinical practice policy and health systems, and crucially, maintaining a strong integrity framework, with a focus on contestability, peer review and transparency. Needless to say, a Shorten Labor government will of course maintain the NHMRC as every Labor government has done since 1937 and we want to work with it, to strengthen its capacity.

The same is true of the Australian Research Council, which funds much related research and of which my colleague Kim Carr is responsible and will have a bit more to say in the coming days. I'm conscious that I stand between you and a main meal and it's a very dangerous place for a guest speaker to be in, so let me conclude by saying that I have enjoyed and appreciated very much your engagement as my five years as shadow Minister. As I have outlined tonight, your sector faces a range of opportunities and challenges over the coming years and so I look forward to continuing to work with you in the lead up to the next election and beyond. Thank you for having me here this evening.