



**aamri**

Association of Australian  
Medical Research Institutes

# SUBMISSION NHMRC CONSULTATION ON PUBLICATIONS IN TRACK RECORD ASSESSMENT

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**Contact:**

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## AAMRI submission – NHMRC consultation on Publications in Track Record Assessment

### 1. Details of the submitting organisation.

Name of the organisation:

**Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI)**

### 2. Please indicate your view on NHMRC's proposal for publication assessment using the drop-down menu below.

**I wish to suggest an alternative proposal**

Provide comments below.

To develop this submission, AAMRI sought feedback from member medical research institutes on the NHMRC's proposed changes to publication assessment for grant schemes.

AAMRI supports the principle underpinning the NHMRC's proposed which prioritises quality over quantity, but recommends further development of the proposal before implementation. There is a risk of unintended negative consequences if the policy is introduced in its current form. The NHMRC should consider feedback from the MRI sector provided in this submission (response to Question 4 below) and seek feedback from the broader sector to better mitigate or prevent any negative impacts of the proposed approach.

AAMRI's response to Question 3 of this submission provides details of potential unintended consequences of the current proposal. AAMRI's response to Question 4 of this submission provides details of alternative approaches suggested by the MRI sector that could be considered when developing the proposal further.

### 3. Please provide any other comments from your organisation on the advantages, disadvantages or other consequences of NHMRC's proposal for publication assessment?

**Recommendation 1 - AAMRI supports the principle of quality of research over quantity that underlies the NHMRC's proposal, but recommends that the NHMRC refine the approach to avoid significant unintended negative consequences for the broader health and medical research sector.**

AAMRI received mixed feedback from medical research institutes and their researchers about the NHMRC's proposal for publication assessment. While supportive of the shift to focus on quality, there were diverse views on whether the proposed approach would achieve the stated goals as well as concerns about what other issues may be introduced or exacerbated by the changes.

Those who were broadly supportive of the proposal commented that an approach like the NHMRC's proposal would better support high profile science that has generated impact and signals to the sector the importance of quality research over quantity of publications.

Others were either not in support of the proposed approach because of possible significant unintended consequences or raised key questions about how the proposed approach was developed. Briefly, the major concerns were:

1. *Multiple limits on publication information are too restrictive to appropriately assess research quality and productivity.*

Many researchers expressed confusion as to why the 10 year limit was going to be in place when the proposal introduces a new limit on number of publications. There were concerns that

limiting to 10 years would be counterproductive alongside other measures that emphasise translation and research impact in assessment of NHMRC schemes. Translation of a seminal research finding into a practical outcome (device, drug, diagnostic, etc) often takes far longer than 10 years and a time limit risks losing this perspective.

2. *Loss of visibility on the applicant's research productivity, capacity and integrity without a full publication list.*

Some researchers who have been NHMRC reviewers reported that a full publication list is necessary to best assess productivity and capacity. This was because a full list provides visibility of the applicant's work in developing a body of research over time. A further consequence of removing the full publication list is that any evidence of corrections to, or retractions of, publications will be lost as they are unlikely to be highlighted in the top 10 list.

3. *Unlikely to reduce administrative load for reviewers.*

Some argued that this approach is unlikely to reduce the load for reviewers as the approach introduces new written material from applicants. It should also be noted that others reported that they felt the proposal would reduce reviewer workload.

4. *Unintended bias against collaborative and enabling research.*

The approach will likely disadvantage middle authors who often make significant contributions to major publications arising from large collaborations. It will also likely disadvantage those in enabling research such as bioinformatics, public health and life-course epidemiology. In these circumstances, research productivity is realised over a period longer than 10 years, and/or significant contributions are made to numerous papers as middle authors. These researchers often generate remarkable impact from their research but will find it more difficult to demonstrate impact from a list of 10 publications than using a full list.

5. *Likely to disadvantage researchers needing more context to their research outputs (junior researchers, women researchers, those with career disruptions, those with diverse career paths).*

The proposed approach has a high risk of exacerbating existing inequities because it will be susceptible to the more challenging aspects of "relative to opportunity" faced by those with complex considerations relating to their publication track records. These groups are likely to have had less funding, lower rates of submitting publications and more career barriers to contend with during the same time period than those without these challenges.

Narrowing the publication assessment to top 10 will likely reduce opportunity for an explanatory narrative that can be used to offset potential biases. Because these factors impact the number of quality publications generated in a 10 year period, they are at a disadvantage when there are limits on both time and number of top publications. For junior researchers, some may not even have 10 papers, particularly those working in basic science. If applicants were to include fewer than 10 papers, it could be difficult for reviewers to ignore quantity of publications in favour of quality. The proposed approach is also unlikely to provide a positive contribution towards closing the gender gap in NHMRC funding schemes.

4. Please provide any other feedback from your organisation on NHMRC's proposal for publication assessment? For example, will the proposal achieve the aims outlined at the start of this paper?

**Recommendation 2 – AAMRI recommends that the NHMRC refine the approach before implementing reform to their publication assessment in grant schemes by:**

- a) **seeking feedback from the broader sector to better mitigate possible unintended negative consequences in the final policy**
- b) **consider feedback provided by the MRI sector in this submission.**

AAMRI received a range of considered and passionate feedback from members about the potential impact of the proposed changes. This suggests that this is not a simple or straight forward change to

implement and broader sector feedback should be sought before finalising any reform to publication assessment in NHMRC schemes.

AAMRI members provided a range of alternatives for consideration by NHMRC in developing this proposal further. These alternative approaches could address the issues described in the previous section and include:

- *Adopting only one limit, preferably increasing the number of top publications in the list. There should be no minimum limit on top publications.*

There was support for related approaches with differing parameters that have been used by prestigious funders internationally (eg NIH Biosketch or Wellcome Trust top 20 publications). To assist outstanding early career researchers, reviewers will need clear guidance regarding fair assessment of applications with fewer than the maximum number of top publications for fair assessment of track record.

- *Provide scope for applicants to include relative to opportunity considerations in the context of publications.*

There was support for more space so that applicants can provide sufficient context for the top publications to better capture their career context including relative to opportunity considerations. The NIH Biosketch was raised as an example. Reviewers will also need clear guidance on how best to apply relative to opportunity considerations when assessing top publications.

- *Expand publication lists to include other outputs such as licenced patents.*

A variety of outputs beyond publications would assist in better recognising excellence in a diverse range of career paths. Without this consideration, there is a risk of perpetuating issues in assessing researchers with 'non-traditional' academic track records (such as researchers working with industry). This could also assist early career researchers with fewer publications but who may have contributed to more diverse impactful outputs through their research.

- *Develop comprehensive guidance for reviewers on how to apply relative to opportunity considerations and how to assess collaborative publications.*

It would be helpful for NHMRC to address this complex and difficult area more comprehensively by leading a discussion with the sector about excellence and success. For example, how should publications be assessed when considering multiple factors such as quantity/quality of publications, applicant as a lead author or significant contributor to a collaboration. This also helps to promote collaborative work, there is a risk that with the proposed approach that there will be a disincentive for researchers to participate in studies and papers where they cannot be first or last author (if it is not advantageous to include in a top 10 or 20).

- *Adopting a gender equity and diversity lens when revising assessment procedures for publication and track record.*

Inequity and bias in areas such as gender, diverse careers, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and other relative to opportunity considerations are often inherently structural. Consequently, they are also pervasive, particularly in processes based on qualitative assessment. Developing new approaches to publication assessment could include developing guidance for reviewers through a gender equity and diversity lens. This could provide guidance to assist in standardising how quality and excellence should be assessed.