MEDIA RELEASE

National Health and Medical Research Council celebrates 200th session

The 77 year old National Health and Medical Research Council will today hold its 200th meeting, following a special Awards dinner attended by the Federal Minister for Health Peter Dutton yesterday.

In his address last night, NHMRC CEO Professor Warwick Anderson said that NHMRC Council has provided the leadership and the vision necessary for the achievement of a range of important and historic initiatives to improve the overall health and wellbeing of all Australians.

‘Over the decades, Council has overseen tens of thousands of funding decisions that support Australia’s best health and medical research – including discoveries that have made a significant global impact,’ Professor Anderson said.

‘It has also helped Australians understand complex health issues such as safe blood lead levels, the links between smoking and disease, and advances in genomics.’

‘As well as this, Council has overseen the establishment of ethical guidelines for the conduct of human and animal research.’

Professor Anderson also reflected on how Council has adapted to the significant changes in the way research has been conducted over the years.

‘In 1937, when Council was first established, researchers had to re-apply for funding every six months. Now, most of our grants are for four or five years, enabling our researchers to tackle the most complex questions,’ Professor Anderson said.

‘Research is now also increasingly international and multidisciplinary, as we harness and contribute to the world’s stock of knowledge.’

The current Chair of Council, The Hon Justice Annabelle Bennett, also emphasised the value of medical research for Australia.

‘The research NHMRC has supported has made significant contributions to our country’s economic prosperity,’ Justice Bennett said.
“There are many examples I could list, but to name just a few – NHMRC has proudly helped to support the research behind the discovery of Colony Stimulating Factors, now used around the world to treat cancers and HIV; the cervical cancer vaccine Gardasil; and the finding that supplementing the diet of pregnant women with folate can reduce the incidence of birth defects.

Justice Bennett quoted a recent report which found that, on the measure of commercialisation alone, the financial benefit of every dollar invested is a return of 72 cents\(^1\), without taking into account the value of health savings or benefits.

Another analysis showed that every $1 spent on health and medical research translates into about $2.17 worth of health benefits\(^2\).

“These results, when viewed in conjunction with NHMRC’s recent publication analysis which validated the world-beating quality of our funded research, signal a very bright future for Australian research – and NHMRC-funded research in particular.”

In speaking about the present and future agenda for NHMRC Council, Professor Anderson indicated that much important work lay ahead.

‘We are focused on ensuring that our assessment processes remain rigorous and of the highest standard, while working to reduce the administrative burden for both applicants and peer reviewers,’ he said.

‘There are still many challenges, and improving the translation of research to better drugs, devices treatments and guidelines remains a key focus for Council, as does the advancement of clinical trials in Australia,’ he said.

‘The members of Council are leaders from all aspects of the community, not just research, so these priorities reflect the wide interests of Australians.’

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