
FOREWORD

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is Australia's leading expert body promoting the development and maintenance of public and individual health standards. The NHMRC has a well established record of achievement and has extensive links with the Australian community, national and international health and research agencies, and many other bodies.

The NHMRC is internationally unique in that it combines within the one organisation the roles and responsibilities of supporting health and medical research, providing health advice, considering ethical issues in health and regulating sensitive medical research activities.

A major focus of this Strategic Plan is the stronger integration of our major activities: research, advice, ethics, regulation to produce better health outcomes for Australians. Corporate governance will be improved to support this integration of activities.

The NHMRC will establish and operate a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Forum reporting directly to Council.

The NHMRC has a key new role in implementing the two Acts relating to the prohibition on human cloning and the regulation of research using excess assisted reproductive technology embryos.

We will also continue to build on our achievements in:

- funding high impact research, including in Government's National Research Priority areas
- developing a strong research work force
- addressing complex ethical issues
- developing high quality advice on a range of health issues
- shaping our organisation to respond most effectively to the needs of government, researchers, health professionals and the Australian community
- developing a research culture that is positive towards research commercialisation
- increasing awareness of the outcomes and benefits of medical research and how this facilitates the development of health standards and health policy
- developing a road map for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health

There are many challenges to meet and opportunities to be seized over the next three years. This strategy sets out a blue print for action to enable the NHMRC to achieve its vision and strategic priorities for research, research and health ethics, and health advice.



Chair of Council
Professor John Shine AO
NHMRC



CEO
Professor Alan Pettigrew
NHMRC

VALUES

VISION

**The best possible health
for all Australians**

The NHMRC adheres to and promotes the following values:

Excellence: Ensuring research excellence through peer review and expert advice, performance monitoring and reporting.

Engagement: Encouraging national and international participation, partnerships, consultation, collaboration, and communication.

Relevance and responsiveness: Ensuring that the organisation is prepared and able to respond appropriately to both immediate and longer term challenges and issues in health.

Leadership: Promoting the benefits of health and medical research, the use of evidence in advice, the highest possible ethical standards, and espousing equity, inclusiveness and mutual respect.

Accountability: Implementing high standards of professional behaviour and performance, and fair, open management in accordance with relevant legislation and Commonwealth policy and guidelines.

NHMRC ROLE

MISSION

**To ensure that excellence
in research, research and
health ethics, and health
advice improves the health
of all Australians**

The NHMRC is established under *The National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992* (The NHMRC Act).

The NHMRC Act establishes four statutory obligations for the NHMRC:

- #1. To raise the standard of individual and public health throughout Australia
- #2. To foster development of consistent health standards between the states and territories
- #3. To foster medical research and training and public health research and training throughout Australia
- #4. To foster consideration of ethical issues relating to health

The NHMRC has recently been given statutory obligations under the *Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2002* (the PHC Act) and the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002* (the RIHE Act) and corresponding State and Territory legislation. In implementing this legislation the NHMRC will regulate uses of excess human embryos created through assisted reproductive technology (ART) and ensure compliance with the prohibition on human cloning and other practices prohibited by the legislation.

NHMRC ACHIEVEMENTS

The NHMRC has been successful in progressing action against the objectives set out in the previous Strategic Plan for 2000-2003¹

Highlights include:

- a major reshaping of funding mechanisms to advance the implementation of the Wills Review of health and medical research², including providing research grants of greater scale, scope and duration; encouraging multi-centre and inter-disciplinary collaboration; and building a range of flexible people support and capacity building grants
- increasing support for the commercial development of health and medical research
- enhancing support for clinical research, public health and health systems research
- activating the Urgent Research Protocol to fund research into SARS
- developing a road map for research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health
- producing a wide range of health advice, information materials and guidelines for clinical care

¹ *The Review of the Implementation of the NHMRC Strategic Plan 2000-2003* at: www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/nh43syn.htm

² *The Virtuous Cycle*, Health and Medical Research Strategic Review 1999

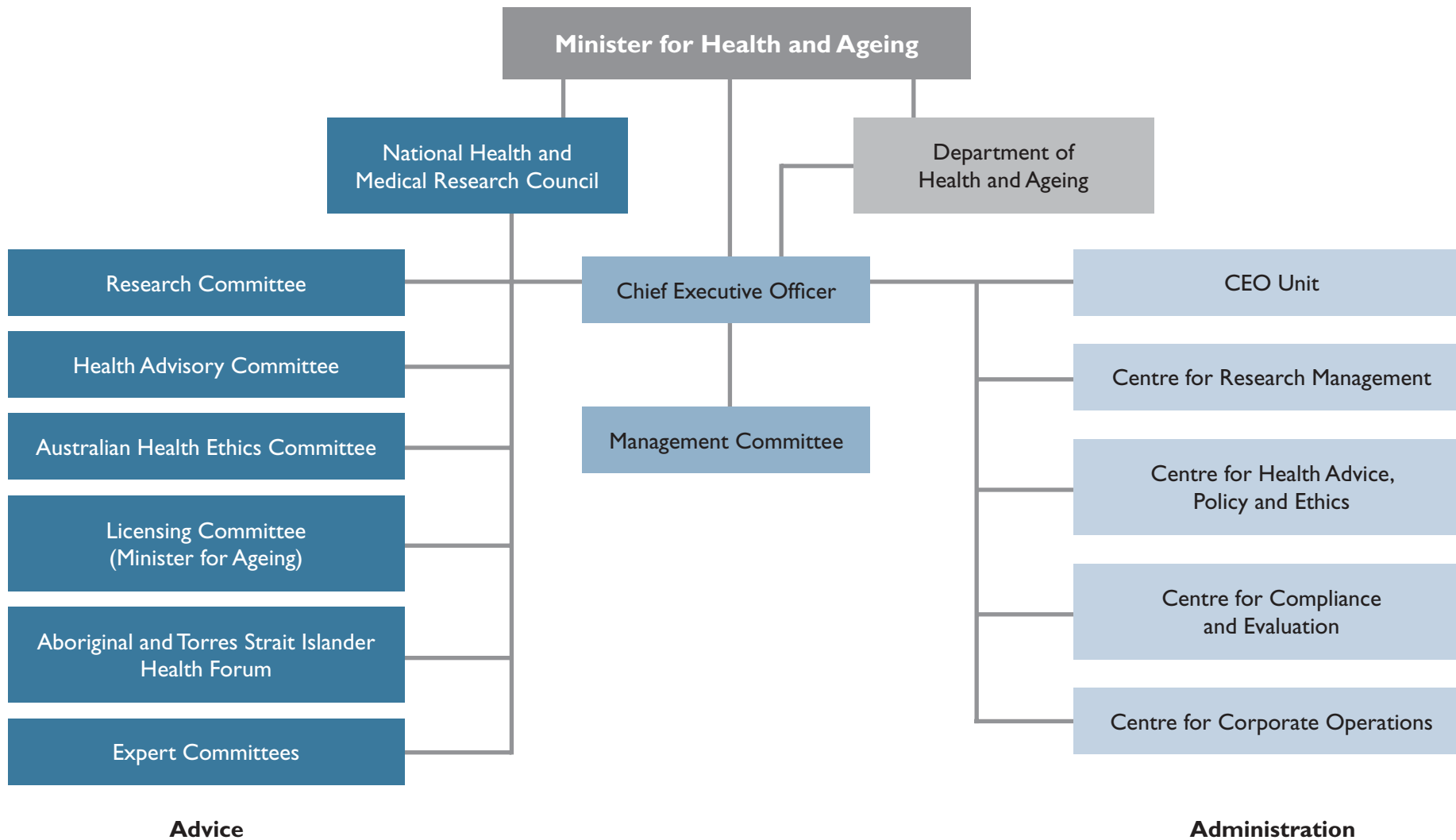
- strengthening support services to Human Research Ethics Committees including hosting a national conference in April 2003 which attracted more than 500 attendees

The NHMRC's achievements are the result of dedicated contributions by thousands of Australia's most respected practitioners, researchers and members of the community. All share a common goal of improving the health of the nation. Their contributions to the NHMRC help enable Australians to enjoy the highest possible standard of health.

RESPONDING TO NEW CHALLENGES

A number of important new structural changes to the NHMRC's operations will be introduced during the Council's current term. These include combining its two previous research committees into a single Research Committee, the refocussing of its health advisory role including the provision of specialised advice through its expert committees, and integrating the new NHMRC Licensing Committee into its structure. It will also see a better alignment of secretariat functions to support the new arrangements. The Council has made a substantial commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health by establishing an over-arching Forum of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and other representatives to advise the Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health issues. This is illustrated in the following diagram.

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NHMRC ENVIRONMENT

The environment within which the NHMRC operates is becoming increasingly complex and challenging. Global challenges in health and progress in health and medical research will continue to have an impact on the health of the Australian population. This is likely to be manifested through emerging health problems and the effect of economic, social, cultural and environmental factors on human health.

Recent developments in Australian Commonwealth Government policy, including the outcomes of the Wills Review, the announcement of Backing Australia's Ability, and the introduction of National Research Priorities, recognise the value of science and research to improve the health of all Australians.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

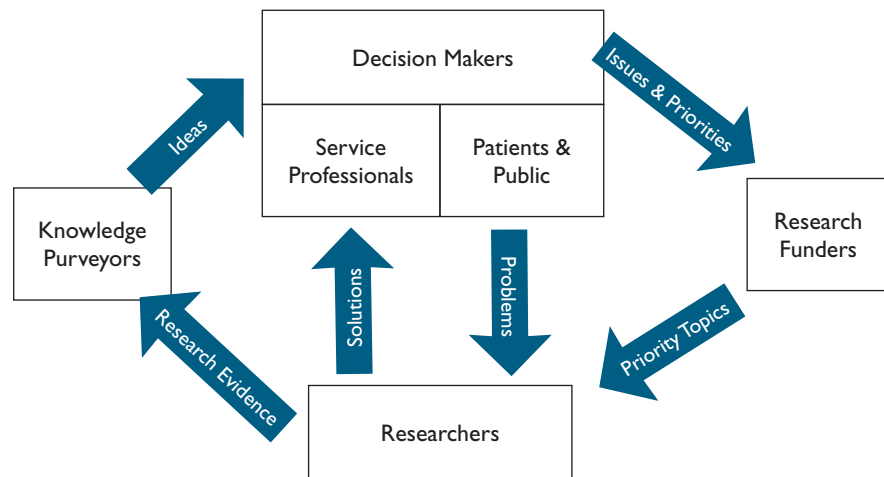
The Commonwealth Government has set new challenges for the research community to develop innovative multi-disciplinary and collaborative approaches to research so that the maximum benefit of Commonwealth funding through NHMRC can be realised. For the health sector, it is imperative that health and medical research is linked with other disciplines and that information is transferred into health policy and practice. The Government has also set a vision of enhanced partnership between research agencies, universities, research institutes, funding bodies such as the NHMRC and the ARC, CSIRO, industry, government departments, and the community.

The NHMRC will build further partnerships (both national and international) over the next three years. It will foster similar activity at the individual researcher level and in the preparation of evidence-based advice for health professionals and the community (see diagram following).

The NHMRC will also work more closely with the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and state and territory departments in facilitating research of relevance to the development of health policy and delivery.

The period of this Strategic Plan will see improved international partnerships to enhance innovation and creativity in NHMRC-funded research, the continued development of health advice and the further consideration of ethical issues for the benefit of all Australians. The NHMRC is mindful that the competition for scarce resources, both nationally and internationally, is making attraction or retention of top quality researchers more difficult.

Evidence-Based Decision Making



Modelled on diagram prepared by Jonathon Lomas.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Research priorities have been identified by Government, Council and major stakeholders. The National Research Priorities and the National Health Priority Areas are identified below. In addition, Council has identified a range of health issues that are important in the timeframe of this Strategic Plan. These are specifically included under the Council's objectives (see pages 10–19).

A. National Research Priorities

A major platform of the National Research Priorities is *Promoting and Maintaining Good Health* with sub-priorities of *Healthy Start to Life, Preventive Healthcare, Ageing Well, Ageing Productively*.

The NHMRC is well positioned to take a lead agency role in the "Health" priority. It is also able to make significant contributions to other priority areas and has developed a Plan for the implementation of National Research Priorities that is incorporated into this Strategic Plan and the Research Committee's Business Plan.

B. National Health Priority Areas

The Commonwealth, state and territory governments have identified the following areas in need of particular focus in the delivery of health care. These areas represent the major proportion of the burden of disease in Australia and will be an area of focus for the NHMRC.

- Arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- Asthma
- Cancer
- Cardiovascular health
- Diabetes
- Mental health
- Injury and injury prevention

C. Issues identified by Council

Ageing population

Australia, like most industrialised countries, is experiencing an ageing of its population. This will place increased pressure on resources, particularly as the “baby-boomer” generation reaches old age. Ageing related research is therefore a high priority for the NHMRC.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health

The NHMRC has identified a range of strategic priorities to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health through community engagement, research, and development of guidelines, all within a sensitive cultural and ethical framework. The priorities identified through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Agenda Working Group (RAWG) are outlined in the NHMRC’s Road Map for Improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.³ Priorities include research that focuses on pregnancy and childhood, tracking

the development of chronic disease, disease prevention, assessing current patterns of disease, death and risk and socio-economic factors.

By the end of the current period, at least 5 per cent of the NHMRC’s research budget will be allocated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.

The NHMRC will establish and operate a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Forum to guide Council activities in this area.

Ethical review framework

The NHMRC has identified the ongoing need to further strengthen the nation’s system of oversight of research involving humans and animals.

This view has been reinforced by the recently announced recommendations of the joint Australian Law Reform Commission/ Australian Health Ethics Committee inquiry into the protection of human genetic information.

Complex public health issues

One of NHMRC’s primary roles is to translate the findings of research into policy and practice and to advise the community on health and medical issues. The NHMRC will continue to provide high quality health advice and clinical practice guidelines, and establish and review standards on a range of issues including communicable diseases, environmental health, illness prevention and health promotion.

³ The NHMRC Road map: www.nhmrc.gov.au/research/srdc/rdmap.pdf

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Legislative and other reviews

Several reviews may impact on the NHMRC in this triennium. These include the legislative reviews of the *Privacy Act 1988*, the *Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2002*, and the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002*. These pieces of legislation are critical to NHMRC operations.

Other reviews include: the ALRC Review of Gene Patenting, the Government's Science and Innovation Mapping exercise (national and international), the Review of the implementation of the Wills recommendations, the Review of Research Collaboration, developing a National Strategy on Research Infrastructure, Review of *Backing Australia's Ability*, Review of the Government's White Paper *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms.

Research infrastructure

There will be continued pressure throughout the triennium on the provision of funding for research to support internationally competitive research in universities, health care facilities and medical research institutes. Inadequate research infrastructure is one of the issues most commonly raised by NHMRC stakeholders.

The NHMRC will play a role in facilitating access for Australian researchers to state-of-the-art facilities and equipment and providing incentives for cooperative development of research infrastructure.

The NHMRC will also make a contribution to the development of Government policy on research infrastructure.

Performance measurement

Monitoring the effectiveness of the NHMRC's programs is an important responsibility of the Council. In the previous triennium, the Council established a comprehensive outcomes framework reflecting the Council's strategic objectives.

The Council will continue to foster high standards of public accountability and inform the wider community of the results of the Government's investment in health through the NHMRC.

The Council will concentrate efforts on demonstrating performance and measuring the scientific, health and socio-economic outcomes generated through the activities of the NHMRC.

STRATEGIC PLAN

This Strategic Plan covers the period 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2006. It is a broadly based plan developed in the context of the NHMRC's environment with input from the previous Council and Committees and a wide range of stakeholders. Each Principal Committee of the NHMRC will develop detailed annual work plans and business plans that will be reviewed by the Council in the context of the Strategic Plan. The individual business plans are aggregated through the NHMRC's Management Committee so that Council is assured that the resources provided to the NHMRC are used in accordance with the Council's Strategic Plan. The Portfolio Budget Statement is also prepared each year to provide the Parliament with a framework for considering budget appropriations and performance. While the Plan is intended to cover the three years, the NHMRC will review the Plan and associated business plans annually to ensure its ongoing relevance in light of factors that may affect the policy and operating environment of the NHMRC.

OBJECTIVES

The Council has seven strategic objectives for the period 2003 to 2006.

The objectives have been established to meet the challenges of the current and future environment whilst maintaining the stated vision and values of the Council. Achievement of these objectives is the combined responsibility of the Council and its Principal Committees.

Objectives	NHMRC Obligations (ref p3)
1. Create internationally competitive knowledge.	NHMRC Act: #1, #3
2. Develop research capacity and capability within Australia.	NHMRC Act: #1, #3
3. Improve the utilisation of research findings in health.	NHMRC Act: #1, #2
4. Maintain and promulgate high ethical standards.	NHMRC Act: #4
5. Engage with the Australian community.	NHMRC Act: #1, #2, #3, #4
6. Build and maintain a comprehensive regulatory framework for the use of excess human embryos and the prohibition of human cloning.	Prohibition of Human Cloning Act Research involving Human Embryos Act
7. Improve governance and accountability.	Financial Management & Accountability Act

OBJECTIVE 1: CREATE INTERNATIONALLY COMPETITIVE KNOWLEDGE

Build an internationally competitive health and medical research sector founded on high impact research, high calibre workforce and infrastructure, and innovation

Outcome 1: New knowledge is created leading to innovation and improvement in health

Our strategies:

- Supporting excellent research as assessed by peer review.
- Ensuring that NHMRC's research award programs meet the needs of the research community and address the following critical health issues that have been identified by Council:
 - Health issues include:
 - Healthy start to life
 - Ageing of the population
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health
 - Illness prevention

- Obesity and overweight
- Oral health
- Anti-microbial resistance
- Environment and health (especially drinking water quality)
- Pain, pain management, and delivery of palliative care
- Rural health
- Multicultural health
- Health systems issues include:
 - Systems of care for chronic disease
 - Health inequalities and 'disadvantaged' populations
 - Efficiency and effectiveness of the health system
 - Safety and quality in health care

- Increasing investment in the Government's National Research Priorities (and areas which relate to them) by using existing and augmented Project, Program and People support schemes to build expenditure as outlined in the NHMRC's Implementation Plan.
- Establishing partnerships and building collaborative effort, particularly in National Research Priority areas, between researchers and research agencies.

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- Facilitating clinical research through implementation of the Chalmers' report⁴ on clinical research and subsequent analysis by the Research Committee.
- Increasing support for health systems research through the Health Policy Research Grant.
- Implementing strategies and research priorities defined in the NHMRC Roadmap for *Improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*.
- level of expenditure devoted to health systems and services research
- implementation of recommendations on clinical research
- level of investment and outcomes of funding in research areas of importance to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health

Our measures will include:

- number/type/value of grants by type and sub-type
- number/type/value of jointly funded grants (to measure collaboration)
- quality of output and outcomes of grant activity (bibliometric output data, NHMRC publication counts in major journals, international comparisons of output per population, citation of Australian papers in national and international patents)
- extent of increased activity in the key priority areas including NHMRC identified areas, National Health Priority Areas and National Research Priority areas
- level of investment in infrastructure/facilities

⁴ *Clinical Research in Australia* – Report of the NHMRC Clinical Research Working Group

OBJECTIVE 2: DEVELOP RESEARCH CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY WITHIN AUSTRALIA

Increase skills in research across the spectrum of health and medical research by expanding training schemes and fellowships, building capacity in clinical, public health and health services research, and working with other organisations and agencies on a broad range of research matters

Outcome 2: Highly trained health and medical research workforce who have access to high quality research equipment and facilities

Our strategies:

- Developing Strategic Research Networks (SRNs), as part of implementing National Research Priorities, to build on platforms of existing research excellence in priority areas, to foster collaborations across disciplines and institutions, and to advise on issues relating to research capability and capacity.
- Building capacity through competitive training schemes and fellowships generally, and particularly in the areas of clinical and public health and in health priority areas.

- Developing an action plan, in consultation with key stakeholders, to build health services research capacity and capability.
- Building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research capacity as outlined in the Road Map.
- Developing a plan of action with others to address issues relating to the provision of research infrastructure.

Our measures include:

- increase in capacity in areas identified as needing more skilled human resources
- number of new participants in SRNs
- extent of collaborations formed and joint projects undertaken within SRNs
- development of a plan of action for the provision of research infrastructure

OBJECTIVE 3: IMPROVE THE UTILISATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS IN HEALTH

Improve standards of individual and public health throughout Australia by:

- providing evidence and encouraging the application of best available evidence in guidelines, policy and practice
- facilitating the appropriate commercial development of health and medical research

Outcome 3: Research findings captured and utilised to improve health outcomes

Our strategies:

- Updating and promulgating standards for the development of evidence-based guidelines and advice.
- Initiating regular joint meetings of subgroups of the Research Committee and Health Advisory Committee to provide better linkages between research findings, health policy and outcomes.
- Strengthening relationships and collaborative arrangements with relevant public health organisations.

- Disseminating advice widely.
- Using IT in delivery of information and health care.
- Communicating the outcomes of research funded by the NHMRC including outcomes from Industry Fellowships and Development Grants.
- Participating in the National Survey of Research Commercialisation annually (based on the Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM) Licensing Survey).
- Promoting research that engages the community in influencing and encouraging changes in health policy and practice.
- Fostering priority driven research to address the key health issues.
- Increasing promotion of schemes within the NHMRC portfolio which foster appropriate commercialisation of research.
- Improving linkages with relevant Ministers, Government Departments, agencies and other organisations involved in commercialisation, protection of Intellectual Property and education of the research workforce.

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Our measures include:

- research findings translated into new products or therapies
- all guidelines across a range of contemporary health issues and concerns relevant to the needs of stakeholders based on evidence
- investment aligned with research and key national health problems
- research discoveries which stimulate economic activity in Australia (eg, incomes, start-ups)
- the outcomes of NHMRC programs that are designed to enhance the partnership between government, researchers and industry
- the outcomes of targeted grant schemes (eg Development Grants, Industry Fellowships)
- patenting activity of grant applicants

OBJECTIVE 4: MAINTAIN AND PROMULGATE HIGH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Develop and maintain an effective ethical review system, encourage community debate and provide well considered, high quality advice on ethical issues in health to governments and the community

Outcome 4: High ethical standards developed and put into practice in institutions conducting research, through an efficient and effective national system of ethical review

Our strategies:

- Providing enhanced support for human research ethics committees, including information and training.
- Updating and publishing standards for ethical review of research involving humans.
- Updating and publishing standards for the care and use of animals in research.
- Providing expert scientific advice to human research ethics committees in areas including embryo research, stem cells, gene therapy and xenotransplantation.

- Monitoring the operations of human research and animal ethics committees.
- Considering specific ethical issues as they arise including privacy and the protection of human genetic information.
- Engaging the community through enhanced public consultation procedures.
- Developing and consulting on new structures and procedures to enhance the national system of ethical review of research involving humans.
- Reviewing, with other organisations, the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice*.
- Reviewing and updating as necessary the National Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans.
- Developing, with other organisations, principles for managing issues of conflict of interest in research.

Our measures include:

- monitoring support provided to HRECs (training and advice)
- maintaining an effective ethical review system (compliance with National Statement, Privacy Act)
- producing and disseminating ethical guidelines and advice (number, subjects, target audience)
- quality of advice produced (relevance, usefulness, timeliness) and the impact of advice

OBJECTIVE 5: ENGAGE WITH THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

Maintain high standards of community engagement and dissemination of the outcomes of the NHMRC's work, and enhance the media and public profile of the NHMRC

Outcome 5: Increased awareness of the Australian community about the benefits of health and medical research and advice provided by the NHMRC

Our strategies:

- Implementing the *Statement on Consumer and Community Participation in Health and Medical Research*.⁵
- Encouraging community participation in forums to consider issues in research, public health and health ethics.
- Engaging the Learned Academies, professional Colleges, peak organisations, community groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the general public in the work of NHMRC.

- Implementing the NHMRC Communication Plan.
- Improving media awareness of the NHMRC and the research it funds.
- Providing forums to consider issues in research, public health, and health ethics.

Our measures include:

- number of research bodies adopting the *Statement on Consumer and Community Participation in Health and Medical Research*
- number of people participating in NHMRC workshop/meetings
- number of consultation documents received
- development and marketing of outcomes of research funded and advice developed by the NHMRC
- quality of outputs produced
- number of media stories
- traffic on the NHMRC website

⁵ *Statement on Consumer and Community Participation in Health and Medical Research* at: www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/r22syn.htm

OBJECTIVE 6: BUILD AND MAINTAIN A COMPREHENSIVE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR THE USE OF EXCESS HUMAN EMBRYOS AND THE PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING

Implement administrative requirements of the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002* and the *Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2002*

Outcome 6: Requirements of the two new Acts implemented

Our strategies:

- Facilitating the establishment of the NHMRC Licensing Committee and supporting all its operations.
- Developing and implementing the strong inspection and compliance capacity expected by Australian governments through educating and training licencees and other relevant organisations.
- Facilitating the introduction of nationally consistent legislation by all jurisdictions and the finalisation of inter-governmental and bilateral agreements.

- Providing advice to Australian governments on matters relating to research involving human embryos and human cloning.
- Communicating effectively with governments and government agencies, researchers and research institutions, IVF service providers, the community and other stakeholders.
- Establishing and supporting a publicly available database of licences issued by the NHMRC Licensing Committee and reporting regularly to Parliament on the operation of the legislation.
- Facilitating and supporting an independent review of the legislation, to start as soon as practicable following 19 December 2004 and to be completed before 19 December 2005.

Our measures include:

- timeliness of the introduction of corresponding legislation in each state and territory
- establishment and maintenance of national consistency in all jurisdictions (through implementation of the IGA and Bilateral agreements)
- compliance with the prohibitions outlined in the *Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2002*
- compliance with all conditions of licence and other requirements outlined in the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002*
- the establishment and implementation of a communication strategy in relation to the Acts

OBJECTIVE 7: IMPROVE GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Develop improved governance and organisation structures to enable the NHMRC to better achieve its objectives in an open and accountable way

Outcome 7: Achievement of improved governance, accountability and organisational structures

Our strategies:

- Continuing to monitor and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the NHMRC's operations to ensure that resources are used to best effect.
- Strengthening the working relationships with the Department of Health and Ageing.
- Monitoring and reporting on outcomes in accordance with the NHMRC's Performance Measurement Framework.
- Monitoring and reporting on management of the NHMRC's operations.

- Ensuring ongoing learning in the Secretariat, through development of a learning organisation/knowledge management strategy.
- Integrating research, advice, ethics, and compliance and evaluation.
- Enhancing the confidence of governments in the NHMRC's ability to implement and support legislation, through limited and efficient bureaucracy and high level technical expertise.
- Reviewing the operations of the NHMRC Act to ensure that the organisation has the highest standards of efficient governance to meet the objectives of an independent statutory organisation within the Health and Ageing portfolio.

Our measures will include:

- demonstration of continuous improvement in the business operations (including systems development and performance measurement) of the NHMRC
- demonstration that the NHMRC is an efficient and effective public sector organisation as judged by the Minister, governments, stakeholders and the community
- satisfaction by Parliament with the operations and performance of the NHMRC against its accountability requirements