



Australian Government

National Health and Medical Research Council

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER RESEARCH

A Healthy Start to Life

POLICY FRAMEWORK

Secretariat Contact

Telephone: (02) 6289 9187

Fax: (02) 6289 9168

Email: ling.lee@nhmrc.gov.au

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PART A – POLICY OBJECTIVES

A.1 BACKGROUND

The Australian Government announced its National Research Priorities in December 2002. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is the lead agency supporting research for the priority *Promoting and Maintaining Good Health*, and its four sub-priorities:

1. A Healthy Start to Life
2. Ageing Well, Ageing Productively
3. Promoting Health and Preventing Disease
4. Strengthening Australia's social and economic fabric.

As part of this initiative, the NHMRC is calling for research to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. The imperative to focus specifically on improving Indigenous health outcomes is driven by the extremely poor state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in Australia compared to non-Indigenous Australians, and a need for significant action.

Research into child developmental health and wellbeing has increasingly informed us that maternal health (including the intra-uterine environment) and the early years of a child's life are critical periods. Programs which intervene during these periods are more successful at improving core developmental outcomes than later interventions.

In relation to core health outcomes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience poorer pregnancy outcomes and are more than twice as likely to have babies of low birth-weight and/or who die at birth or in the early post-natal phase. Compared with other Australian children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and young children continue to have higher illness and death rates from a range of preventable conditions such as infections and accidents. They also have higher rates of mental illness and youth suicide.

The Road Map

This call for research is informed by an extensive and completed consultation process conducted during 2002. For the NHMRC, this consultation process (known as the Road Map) provides a fully endorsed framework to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (see www.nhmrc.gov.au/research/srdc/indigen.htm). The consultations involved members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, researchers, policy makers and health service providers from across Australia.

A consistent theme throughout the consultations was that many of the determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lie beyond the health sector. Factors such as culture, identity and community are critical antecedents for improved health amongst Australia's Indigenous people.

A key recommendation of the Road Map was the need for broader, multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary research to ensure the relevance of research to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This research initiative reflects the NHMRC's recognition that meaningful and constructive policy to affect long term health gains for Aboriginal and Torres Strait people is predicated upon research that acknowledges the complex interplay between health and non-health issues.

A.2 POLICY OBJECTIVES

This is a deliberately broad research agenda. It seeks

- active engagement across a broad spectrum of disciplines which could include the humanities, social, environmental and health sciences;
- the establishment of research partnerships across relevant sectors; and,
- integrated involvement of researchers, policy makers, health service providers and Indigenous communities in the identification of research questions, conduct of research and translation of findings into actions.

Effective interventions to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires the participation of many sectors, often outside the mainstream health sector. An integrated research effort to ensure coordinated, responsive service delivery across all sectors is critical. This initiative aims to promote the establishment of well-coordinated, cohesive research teams that involve a broad range of disciplines, and are strategically linked with relevant sectors. Effective research collaborations, particularly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups and representatives, are imperative to the success of this initiative. Therefore, an allowance of up to \$10,000 to conduct consultations will be available to those applicants whose Expression of Interest is short-listed and are subsequently invited to submit full applications.

Importantly, applicants are encouraged to consider issues that impact on *A Healthy Start to Life* for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in diverse settings, from remote and rural to urban and urban fringe populations.

NHMRC applications for research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must adhere to the NHMRC's *Guidelines for Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* (available at www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/e52syn.htm), and must demonstrate that the application fulfils the NHMRC *Criteria for Health and Medical Research of Indigenous Australians* (available at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/funding/indighth.pdf>).

A.3 ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER RESEARCH *A HEALTHY START TO LIFE*

A.3.1 Funding

Total funding of \$7 million over 5 years is available to support this initiative. It is envisaged that grants of up to \$500,000 per annum will be funded and the period of proposed research will be for a duration of 3 to 5 years.

A.3.2 Theme

A focus on the factors and processes that promote resilience and well-being during periods of pregnancy, infancy, childhood and adolescence was identified by the Road Map as a key theme for priority research, and relates strongly to the Australian Government's research priority *Promoting and Maintaining Good Health*.

Significant issues relevant to this theme derived from the Road Map consultations are outlined at **Attachment B**. It should be noted that the issues highlighted are indicative only and the NHMRC encourages as wide a view as possible of the questions and themes that might be addressed.

A.4 FURTHER INFORMATION

Further specific information about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research *A Healthy Start to Life* initiative can be found in Part B of this document or by contacting the Secretariat on (02) 6289 9187 or via email at ling.lee@nhmrc.gov.au

PART B - APPLICATION AND ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The application process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research *A Healthy Start to Life* will comprise two stages.

➤ *Stage 1 - Expressions of Interest*

The Expression of Interest stage is designed to ensure that only information essential to select a short-list of candidates is requested.

➤ *Stage 2 - Full Applications*

Short-listed applicants will be asked to submit a detailed proposal.

The current timeline for the application process is at **Attachment A**.

STAGE 1 - EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

B.1 ELIGIBILITY

B.1.1 Administering Institution

Please note that the NHMRC can only pay funds to an NHMRC registered Administering Institution. Therefore, if your proposed Administering Institution is not yet registered with the NHMRC, it must do so. Further information on the requirements for NHMRC Administering Institutions is available at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/research/project/instruct/applicat.htm>

The NHMRC will recognise only one institution as the Administering Institution. The Administering Institution must have in place policies and procedures for the management of public funds and the proper conduct of research in relation to ethics and good scientific conduct.

B.1.2 Research Teams

It is expected that research teams will comprise cross-sectoral, multi-disciplinary collaborations – including non-health sectors, such as education, employment, environment, transport, etc., and disciplines such as the humanities, social and environmental sciences - to investigate innovative and potentially effective approaches.

Applicants do not need to necessarily demonstrate that the proposed team has a history of working together, however, applicants should be able to show that the composition of the team is viable and be able to explain how they will ensure productive working partnerships.

It is expected that parties to the team will have engaged in preliminary discussions to identify potential research / service delivery synergies, and will have “in principle” commitment to participate in the research consortium. Ideally, applicants will provide documentary evidence from research partners to substantiate the proposed collaboration (eg a letter from research partners documenting preliminary discussions, willingness to participate in the research team and in delivery of proposed outcomes). The feasibility and robustness of the governance structure to manage the research collaboration will be a significant component for assessment.

All Chief Investigators must have Australian Citizenship *or* permanent Australian residency status. International partners may be included in the team as Associate Investigators if appropriate.

B.1.3 Holders of NHMRC and other grants

Applicants who are current holders of other research grants are eligible to apply for funding under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research *A Healthy Start to Life* initiative. However, applicants must be able to demonstrate that:

- the proposed research does not duplicate work funded from another source; and
- team members are able to commit sufficient time to meet the proposed research deliverables.

Note: Current holders of NHMRC Programs and/or Projects are eligible to apply.

B.1.4 Intellectual Property

Institutions and research teams are expected to have appropriate policies and procedures in place to identify, protect and manage intellectual property arising from the research. These policies and procedures must comply with the *Interim Guidelines for Intellectual Property Management for Health and Medical Research* released by the NHMRC. This document is available on the NHMRC website at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/research/general/ipmgtsyn.htm>

Research teams must ensure that there is a written agreement between participating organisations on the ownership of intellectual property and associated rights in relation to the research supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research *A Healthy Start to Life*.

B.2 SUBMISSION OF EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

The NHMRC recognises that extensive consultations will need to occur between all potential research collaborators. Given that a limited number of grants is likely to be funded it is imperative that Expressions of Interest contain the most relevant information.

Applicants should use the *Stage 1 - Guide to Applicants* and *Stage 1 - Expressions of Interest Form* to submit their initial proposal.

This documentation is available from the NHMRC website at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au> (Hot Issues)

Applications must be submitted electronically and in hard copy in accordance with the instructions contained in the *Stage 1 - Guide to Applicants*.

B.3 SHORT-LISTING

The Selection Committee (Chair: Professor Aileen Plant) will consider the Expressions of Interest against the assessment criteria outlined in **Attachment C**. Membership and composition of the Selection Committee has yet to be finalised, and will be advised via the NHMRC website in due course.

Proposals will be short-listed and applicants accordingly notified of the outcome.

B.4 UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS

Applicants may contact the NHMRC seeking clarification with regard to the outcome of their application for funding under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research *A Healthy Start to Life*. The Office of the NHMRC will provide a written response to all requests for clarification.

Formal complaints against the administrative process can be made to the Commissioner of Complaints under section 59 of the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992*. The Act is available from the NHMRC website at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/aboutus/index.htm>

B.5 IMPORTANT NOTES - STAGE 1

The NHMRC reserves the right to broker collaborations and/or communicate with researchers to refine proposals as required. Brokered collaborations may then be invited to submit a detailed proposal for Stage 2.

STAGE 2 - FULL APPLICATION

B.6 ELIGIBILITY

Only short-listed applicants from Stage 1 will be eligible to submit a full application.

For short-listed applicants, an allowance of up to \$10,000 will be available from the NHMRC to facilitate research consultations particularly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups and representatives.

B.7 SUBMISSION OF FULL APPLICATION

For Stage 2, applicants will be asked to give a detailed account of the proposed research. This must include supporting documentation outlining the commitment of all partners, whether cash, in-kind or other.

Applicants should use the *Stage 2 - Guide to Applicants* and *Stage 2 - Full Application Form* to submit their Stage 2 proposal.

This documentation will be available from the NHMRC website on completion of the short-listing process.

Applications must be submitted electronically and in hard copy in accordance with the instructions contained in the *Stage 2 - Guide to Applicants*.

B.8 PEER REVIEW

Stage 2 applications will be assessed by external peer review. It is likely that external peer reviewers will include internationals with relevant expertise.

Peer reviewers will be asked to assess applications for their excellence and rigour in accordance with the criteria at **Attachment C**. Peer reviewers will not be asked to make comparative assessments (comparative assessment is the prerogative of the Selection Committee). Peer reviewers will be asked to provide their assessments to the Selection Committee for further consideration.

Applicants will be provided with de-identified copies of assessor comments and be given an opportunity to respond.

Applicants may be called for interview.

B.9 CONSIDERATION BY THE SELECTION COMMITTEE

In making their funding recommendations, the Selection Committee will consider:

- the full application against the selection criteria;
- comments from peer review; and
- responses to assessor comments.

The Selection Committee will also consider other factors such as the feasibility of the proposal against the objectives of this initiative, the governance arrangements for the research team and its research agenda, and the budget sought. Applications should clearly demonstrate to the Selection Committee an understanding of what would constitute an appropriate organisational structure,

Application and Assessment Process

financial management system and research advisory mechanism for the team and the management of its activities. Applicants need to be able to demonstrate that the governance structure will ensure a fully functional and collaborative partnership, and coordinated delivery of research outcomes.

The Selection Committee will make recommendations for funding to the NHMRC Research Committee, through the Strategic Research Initiatives Working Committee.

The Research Committee will forward its recommendations through Council to the Minister for Health and Ageing. The final decision on successful applications will rest with the Minister.

Note:

The Selection Committee may draw on international experts to assist with their deliberations.

B.10 SUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS

The conditions of award for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research *A Healthy Start to Life* will be set out in a Deed of Agreement between the Commonwealth and the Administering Institution.

A program may not commence, nor grant funds be expended, prior to:

- the Deed of Agreement being in place;
- the appropriate Schedule being signed; and
- all required ethics clearances and approvals having been obtained.

B.11 UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS

Applicants may contact the NHMRC seeking clarification with regard to the outcome of their application for funding under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research *A Healthy Start to Life*. The Office of the NHMRC will provide a written response to all requests for clarification.

Formal complaints, against the administrative process, can be made to the Commissioner of Complaints under section 59 of the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992*. The Act is available from the NHMRC website at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/aboutus/index.htm>

B.12 EVALUATION OF THE INITIATIVE

The NHMRC will monitor components of the initiative and may subsequently conduct a comprehensive evaluation of this research initiative.

B.13 IMPORTANT NOTES - STAGE 2

- i. The NHMRC reserves the right not to make a grant recommendation to the Minister if applications are not of sufficient quality and/or do not meet the specified criteria.
- ii. Research funded by the NHMRC must comply with established guidelines, including the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice*, which can be found at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/research/policy.htm>.
- iii. It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that a copy of the application is referred to the relevant Institutional Ethics Committee or other approval body.

**CURRENT TIMEFRAME
(17 December 2003)**

1. Call for Research – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research <i>A Healthy to Start to Life</i>	Wednesday, 17 December 2003
• Call for Expressions of Interest – NHMRC Website	Saturday, 20 December 2003
• Call for Expressions of Interest – <i>The Australian</i>	
2. Closing date for submissions of Expressions of Interest (Stage1)	Friday, 26 March 2004
3. EOI submissions collated and sent to the Selection Committee and supplementary international reviewers	Friday, 2 April 2004
4. Meeting of the Selection Committee and supplementary international reviewers to rank submissions and determine a short-list	Friday, 30 April 2004
5. Request for full applications (Stage 2)	Friday, 7 May 2004
6. Closing date for submission of full applications (Stage 2)	Friday, 30 July 2004
7. Feedback provided	TBA
8. Responses to feedback due	TBA
9. Interviews to be advised if required	TBA (if applicable)
10. Recommendation sent to the Strategic Research Initiatives Working Committee	TBA
11. Recommendations sent to Research Committee	TBA
11. Recommendations sent to the Minister for Health & Ageing	TBA
12. Advice to applicants/Announcement	TBA

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER RESEARCH
A HEALTHY START TO LIFE

Indicative Questions

- To obtain a better understanding of the broader determinants of health (including identity, culture and racism) during early life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, through intervention studies that will lead to improved health outcomes. Specific questions that may be relevant to *A Healthy Start to Life* arising from the Road Map consultation process could include:
 - identification of significant factors and interventions of influence upon maternal health, health of the mother and foetus during pregnancy, and health of the child during infancy and early childhood.
 - Identification of significant environmental factors, such as water supply, housing infrastructure, etc. that impact upon the health of the mother, developing foetus and young children.
 - what constitutes resilience, for individuals, families and communities, at particular stages of life?
 - what is the relationship between trust, respect and cultural security, and how important is it to resilience and wellbeing?
 - what are the coping strategies in an urban Aboriginal identity and urban Torres Strait Islander identity?
 - how do social and cultural determinants impact on morbidity and mortality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in later life?
 - the importance of social determinants and factors which lie outside of the health sector but which impact on health.
 - how can the impact of social and cultural factors on health be assessed and how can these issues be addressed?

- What are the critical life-cycle transition points in early life (eg biological, developmental and/or cultural)? What are the most appropriate transition points for interventions and how can interventions be most effectively implemented?

- Critical analysis of maternal and child health (MCH) services and service delivery:
 - what are the critical success factors in service delivery? What are the barriers and facilitators to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessing appropriate MCH services?
 - cost/benefit analyses of MCH service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
 - how do macro-politics and inter-governmental relations impact on MCH services delivery (e.g. financing decisions & allocations of funds)? Does the current system of allocating funding to MCH services correspond to the needs of Indigenous Australians?

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The following criteria include the contributions of all members of the research team *and* its partners, except where specified otherwise.

➤ **Quality, significance and potential contribution of research to policy and practice (50%)**

- scientific merit;
- relevance to *A Healthy Start to Life* and Road Map objectives and how the outcomes of the research are likely to lead to improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- extent to which applicants have established effective mechanisms to ensure that the research is relevant to the needs of policy makers, will inform policy decisions, and may be used to further develop programs or policies;
- proposed strategies for capacity building, specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities;
- the extent to which the application fulfils the *Criteria for Health and Medical Research of Indigenous Australians* (see <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/funding/indighth.pdf>).

➤ **Quality and robustness of the collaboration (30%)**

- composition and cross-sectoral / multi-disciplinary nature of the research team;
- particular strengths of this research collaboration in potentially achieving the objectives of this initiative;
- extent of research collaboration and demonstrated capacity for (and evidence of) coordinated research effort (eg. letter of support articulating agreement to participate from principal research partners and, if available, indicative allocation of funding);
- clearly articulated research management structure to ensure coordinated delivery of outcomes.

➤ **Record of achievement relevant to this initiative (20%)**

Research team

- extent to which applicants' previous research, policy or practice activities have contributed to knowledge, changes in policy and practice, and health gain of particular relevance to this initiative;
- record of outputs and outcomes of research;
- achievements in service delivery;
- publication records (various types);
- relevant grant funding history;
- invitations to present work nationally or internationally.

Additional requirements particularly for the Team Leader

- experience in organising and setting up a consortium;
- experience managing a multi-disciplinary / cross-sectoral team;
- success in team leadership;
- track record in effective mentoring and/or capacity building and high level professional development.