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National Health and Medical Research Council

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National Health and Medical Research Council
Corporate Plan 2015 – 2016

WORKING TO BUILD A HEALTHY AUSTRALIA

National Health and Medical Research Council
Corporate Plan 2015 – 2016

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Message from the CEO

We live in a time of extraordinary growth in knowledge about human life, health and disease. We are also seeing the impact of decades of fundamental research – in genetics, cancer biology, immunology, neuroscience and many other fields – on the prevention and treatment of previously intractable illnesses. We are fortunate to live in such times.

This progress is the result of far-sighted investment by governments, foundations, the corporate sector and individuals around the world. In Australia, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is the leading expert body investing in health and medical research. It also develops health advice and provides a framework for ethical behaviour in health care and in the conduct of medical research. NHMRC is proud that Australian researchers have been important contributors to global advances in the understanding of health and disease and in its application to the improvement of human health and wellbeing.

Today we also know enough to realise that this journey of discovery and implementation has just begun, that there is much we do not yet understand and that many brilliant ideas are yet to be translated into policy and practice. At the same time, we face new challenges with changes in the burden of disease, population demographics and global health risks which will only be overcome through the sustained effort of our health and medical research sector.

Over 6,000 researchers are currently supported by NHMRC. They undertake outstanding research that ranges from investigating the most fundamental aspects of human life through to developing new vaccines and therapies and building the evidence base for improved health services. Many work in national and international partnerships, supported by a range of schemes that foster collaboration. NHMRC seeks to strike a balance between the support of discovery and innovation through investigator-initiated research across the full spectrum of health issues and targeted research on questions of special or urgent concern.

The high quality of NHMRC-funded research is built on robust review processes. Each year over 4,000 researchers give their time and expertise to evaluate more than 5,000 grant applications, ensuring that the best research and researchers are funded. Peer review by independent experts will continue to be integral to NHMRC's support of excellence in health and medical research in Australia.

A strong research integrity framework is essential to the performance of high quality research and to community trust in its outcomes. Researchers, institutions and funding bodies must work together to ensure that Australia maintains its high ethical standards and reputation for integrity in research. NHMRC will continue to provide leadership and guidance in this area.

The importance of integrating evidence into health policy, practice and standards cannot be overestimated. Achieving evidence-based improvements in health relies on many players and partnerships between all levels of government, professional bodies, private organisations and international counterparts. To aid this work of translation, NHMRC develops guidelines that are relevant and reliable, founded on a strong evidence base, informed by wide consultation with consumers and the community and in partnerships across all levels of government and relevant sectors.

The NHMRC is committed to allocating at least five per cent of the Medical Research Endowment Account (MREA) to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. This level was reached in 2008 and has since increased to around six per cent. NHMRC's commitment to improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is further reflected in the NHMRC Reconciliation Action Plan launched in 2015.

There are many pathways to the translation of research into improved health and health care. The critical first step is the invention of new technologies and approaches, and this depends on a culture of intellectual freedom and innovation. In some cases, commercialisation of these new ideas is essential to provide the necessary investment for development of new drugs, vaccines, devices and programs. It is therefore important not only to the Australian economy but also to the delivery of health benefits from research that we support and build researcher capacity in innovation and commercialisation. This will be an area of strategic focus for NHMRC over the period of this Plan. NHMRC will also take a leadership role in improving the clinical trials environment in Australia, working with the Department of Health, the Department of Industry and Science, states and territories and other stakeholders to develop a nationally consistent approach to clinical trials.

Over the period of this Plan, NHMRC will continue to support the full breadth of health and medical research. It will fund the highest quality research and the best young and established researchers, foster national and international research partnerships, develop evidence-based advice on topics relevant to health, and provide national leadership in health and research ethics. Health services, clinical, public health and biomedical research are all within NHMRC's scope.

Australia must invest in research to meet its own current and future health needs and to contribute to solving the enormous health challenges of our shared world. This Corporate Plan provides a blueprint for NHMRC to fulfil its mission in this national endeavour.

Statement of Preparation

As the accountable authority of the NHMRC, I present the *NHMRC Corporate Plan 2015–2016*, which covers the periods of 2015–16 to 2018–19. It has been prepared as required under paragraph 35(1)(b) of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act) and Section 16 of the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992* (NHMRC Act).

Professor Anne Kelso AO
Chief Executive Officer
National Health and Medical Research Council

Introduction

Requirements for the Corporate Plan

This Corporate Plan sets out NHMRC's purposes, planned activities and performance for the period 2015–16 to 2018–19, and addresses capability, environment and risk oversight and management in line with PGPA Act requirements.

The NHMRC Act also requires the development of a corporate plan, including consultation with Council of the NHMRC and the Minister for Health, setting out:

- the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO's) assessment of the major national health issues that are likely to arise during the period
- the manner in which the CEO proposes to perform his or her functions in dealing with those issues during the period
- a national strategy for medical research and public health research.¹

These matters are also addressed in this Plan, with the key activities NHMRC will be undertaking over the next four years set out under three major themes of investment, translation and integrity.

¹ Section 16 NHMRC Act

About NHMRC

The CEO of the NHMRC is advised and supported by the Council of the NHMRC, and assisted by a number of Principal Committees, illustrated in Figure 1. The CEO, the Council and the Principal Committees are appointed by the responsible minister. The NHMRC operates on a triennium basis, with the Council and Principal Committees re-appointed every three years. The last triennium concluded in June 2015, and a new Council and Principal Committees have been appointed for the current triennium, which will run until June 2018.

Council represents a wide range of expertise. Chaired by Professor Bruce Robinson AM, it includes the Australian Government Chief Medical Officer and state and territory chief health and medical officers. It also includes members with specific expertise in the health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in consumer issues and in business, as well as members with expertise in a wide range of health-related disciplines. Over the coming triennium, the Council will provide advice to the CEO to ensure that NHMRC's strategic direction is effectively linked to current and emerging issues relevant to health and medical research.

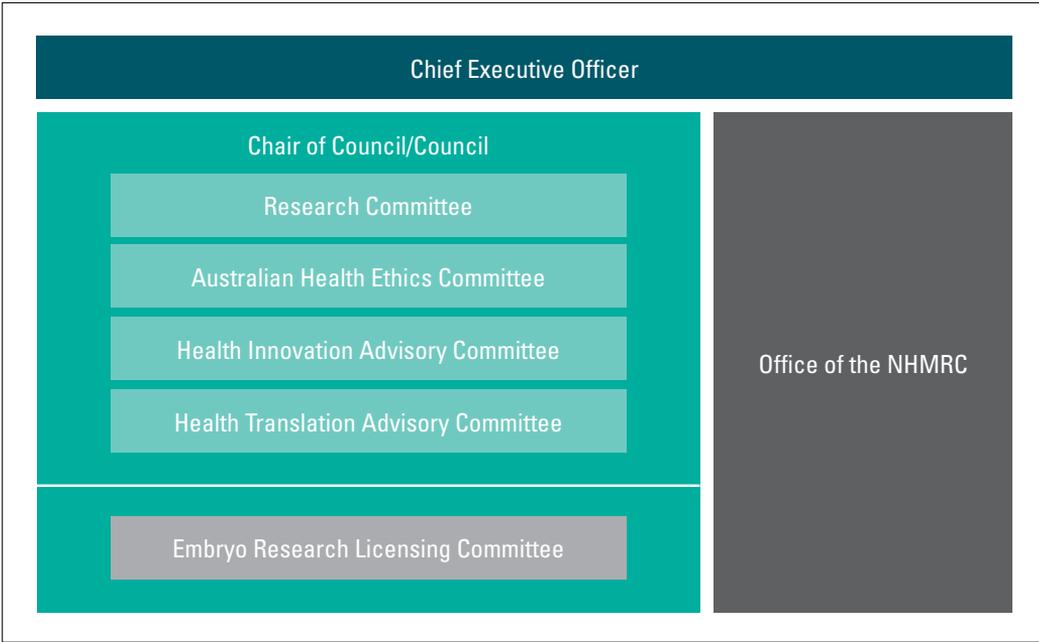
Principal Committees assist Council in carrying out its functions, helping to provide an effective governance and advisory structure for the NHMRC. The Research Committee (RC) and the Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) are required by the NHMRC Act and their functions are determined by legislation.² The role of RC, as set out in Section 35(2) of the NHMRC Act, includes advising Council on the application and monitoring of the MREA and on matters relating to medical research and public health research, including the quality and scope of such research in Australia. The role of AHEC, as set out in Section 35(3) of the NHMRC Act, includes advising Council on ethical issues relating to health and developing and providing to Council human research guidelines. In addition, the Embryo Research Licensing Committee, under the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002*, is taken to be an NHMRC Principal Committee. The NHMRC carries out its responsibilities through this committee for administering the national regulatory system for research involving human embryos.³

² Section 35 NHMRC Act

³ *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002* (RIHE Act) and the *Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction Act 2002* (PHCR Act).

Apart from these committees that are required by legislation, the responsible minister may establish non-statutory Principal Committees to assist the Council. For the triennium commencing in July 2015, two new Principal Committees have been established: the Health Innovation Advisory Committee (HIAC) and the Health Translation Advisory Committee (HTAC). They reflect NHMRC’s strategic priorities related to (i) the development, commercialisation and uptake of innovative technologies and practices and (ii) the effective translation of evidence to improve clinical outcomes and public and environmental health. The committees will enhance the NHMRC’s capacity to deliver on these key priority areas.

Figure 1 Structure of NHMRC



Capability

Over the period of this Corporate Plan, the NHMRC will maintain its commitment to continuous improvement and harnessing of efficiencies in an environment of fiscal restraint, reducing red tape for its stakeholders and making best use of technology. Key capabilities for the NHMRC include those related to workforce, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the NHMRC’s peer review system. A proactive and rigorous approach to corporate governance is also a critical capability area.

As a small non-corporate entity, NHMRC will support its programs and workforce by:

- providing a professionally rewarding and positive workplace to promote retention of employees in identified critical roles and other high performing employees
- working to address current skill gaps in ICT and other identified areas through recruitment strategies, training initiatives, and outsourcing for these skills where necessary
- exploring options that provide value for money to support NHMRC business, which may realise savings that could be redirected to core work
- encouraging increased adoption of technology to reduce core work load and costs.

In regard to ICT, the Smaller Government Reform and Digital Transformation Agenda requires the agency to engage more efficiently and effectively with its many stakeholders nationally and internationally through the improved use of digital channels and technology. These reforms include the Efficiency through Contestability Programme, the Financial and Performance Management Framework, shared and common services, the Digital Transformation Agenda (DTA) and red tape reduction.

A transformative approach to external engagement is required to meet the higher demands of digital service delivery for the government. To keep pace with these expectations, NHMRC will need to maximise resource investment in core business activities that maintain and continuously improve service delivery to the research community and government customers.

To support this transformation, NHMRC will explore external sourcing models for the delivery of its ICT platform representing non-core business, including shared and common services adoption for transactional corporate activities; and where appropriate, consider market based offerings including cloud hosting, software and infrastructure as a service for core ICT services. In addition, NHMRC will look to leverage opportunities to adopt digital reform using technology to change how the organisation engages and delivers services to its stakeholders.

The peer review processes used by NHMRC are a key capability for the agency. They are integral to supporting the best health and medical research in Australia, ensuring that application processes are fair, transparent, efficient and effective. Peer review can be defined as the ‘impartial and independent assessment of research by others working in the same or a related field’⁴ and this process provides independent expert review of all NHMRC grant applications, with careful attention to avoiding potential conflicts of interest. Community Observers on peer review panels provide additional assurance that NHMRC processes have been followed

⁴ *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research, 2007, Section 6*

transparently, responsibly, and in line with policy. Similarly, the involvement of teams of specialists following a rigorous evidence-based approach in the development of clinical, public health and ethical guidelines is critical to the quality of this advice. During the period of this Plan, the NHMRC will continue to work towards maximising the excellence and efficiency of the peer review system and managing the burden on peer reviewers, as well as working collaboratively to enhance the guideline development system.

NHMRC operates within a corporate governance framework that promotes integrity, compliance, performance and efficiency. A number of initiatives to be undertaken over the period of this Plan will continue to promote agency capability in this area. NHMRC will undertake a review of its corporate policies. An initial review to ensure compliance with the PGPA Act has already been undertaken, and a more comprehensive stocktake is now underway. A new framework and direction for managing risk will also be developed, along with training in fraud awareness and control.

Risk oversight and management

NHMRC is committed to managing its risk both strategically and systematically. The NHMRC's *Risk Management Policy and Framework 2014-2015*⁵ was developed in accordance with the International Standard on Risk Management, *AS/NZS/ISO 31000:2009 Risk Management Principles and Guidelines* and the PGPA Act and *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014*.

The *Risk Management Policy and Framework 2014-2015* provides the foundations and organisational arrangements for designing, implementing, monitoring, reviewing and continually improving risk management throughout NHMRC. The document details NHMRC's approach to identify and manage risks including:

- the processes that will be used to identify, analyse and manage the risks
- how often the risks will be reviewed and the process for reviewing the risks
- identifying who will be responsible for which aspects of risk management
- identifying how the treatment of the risks (mitigation) will be reported
- providing the initial snapshot of the major risks, current risk ratings, planned strategies for reducing the likelihood and/or consequence of each risk (mitigation strategies).

NHMRC maintains a strategic risk register to record details of all its identified risks, the likelihood and consequences of each risk occurring and controls designed to mitigate each risk.

⁵ NHMRC will commence a review of the *Risk Management Policy and Framework* in mid-2015.

NHMRC's purposes

NHMRC's functions are to foster 'improved health and medical knowledge, including through funding research, translating research findings into evidence-based clinical practice, administering legislation governing research, issuing guidelines and advice for ethics in health and the promotion of public health'.⁶ These functions reflect the role for NHMRC set out in its enabling legislation.⁷

The scope and reach of NHMRC's activities are broad, with the agency spanning a wide range of health topics in the various aspects of its work – from funding research to guideline development and advice. The overall purposes of NHMRC, supporting the agency's mission of 'working to build a healthy Australia', can be summarised as follows:

- fund high quality health and medical research and build research capability
- support the translation of health and medical research into better health outcomes
- promote the highest ethical standards in health and medical research.

These purposes are implemented through a strategy with three underpinning key themes, closely linked to NHMRC's purposes. These themes are investment, translation and integrity.

The major component of NHMRC's work is to administer the Medical Research Endowment Account (MREA) to fund priority-driven, strategic research and researcher-initiated research. A summary of NHMRC's funding schemes is provided in Table 1.

Consistent with the NHMRC Act, NHMRC focuses on the relevance of research proposals for health, rather than defining 'health and medical research' as a set of research disciplines. NHMRC will fund research in any or all areas relevant to health. It will also accept grant applications in any research discipline and applicants are provided with an opportunity within their application to explain how their research will lead to improved outcomes in health. Each application is then assessed against the published selection criteria for the particular funding scheme.

Consultation with stakeholders, including consumers and community members, is intrinsic to much of what NHMRC does. Through consultation processes and participation in NHMRC Committees a wide spectrum of Australians contribute to ensuring the excellence of NHMRC's work and promoting trust in the integrity and value of science in health decision-making.

⁶ Department of Health Portfolio Budget Statements 2015-16, p.399

⁷ Under the NHMRC Act, NHMRC is responsible for promoting the development of individual and public health standards, fostering national consistency in health standards, supporting research and training, and fostering consideration of relevant ethical issues.

Table 1 Investigator Initiated and Priority Driven NHMRC Funding Outcomes in 2014⁸

MAIN FUNDING GROUP	GRANT TYPE	INVESTIGATOR INITIATED	PRIORITY DRIVEN
Research Support	Project Grants	\$397,974,736	
	Project Grants - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research		\$22,008,217
	Project Grants - Hearing Loss Prevention		\$1,110,022
	Program Grants	\$98,251,020	
	Centres for Research Excellence	\$34,873,094	
	Centres for Research Excellence - Diabetic Retinopathy		\$2,479,298
	Centres for Research Excellence - Hearing Loss Prevention		\$2,499,750
	Centres for Research Excellence - Type 1 Diabetes		\$7,490,789
	Development Grants	\$15,178,566	
	Partnership Projects for Better Health	\$9,748,304	
	Targeted Research - Indigenous Youth Suicide		\$4,515,884
NHMRC/NIHR ⁹ Collaborative Research Grants		\$1,320,934	
Research Support total		\$556,025,720	\$41,424,894
People Support	Research Fellowships	\$59,195,290	
	Practitioner Fellowships	\$8,010,206	
	Career Development Fellowships	\$24,065,688	
	Early Career Fellowships	\$38,072,870	
	Early Career Fellowships - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research		\$1,297,744
	Translating Research Into Practice (TRIP) Fellowships	\$1,729,110	
	Scholarships	\$6,917,358	
	Scholarships - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research		\$453,040
People Support Co-funding	\$3,000,000		
People Support total		\$140,990,522	\$1,750,784
Infrastructure Support	Independent Medical Research Institutes (MRI) Infrastructure Grants	\$32,715,778	
	Equipment Grants	\$5,999,998	
	National Health Research Enabling Capabilities Grants	\$1,737,500	
Infrastructure Support total		\$40,453,276	
Investigator vs Priority total		\$737,469,517	\$43,175,678
All outcomes total		\$780,645,195	

⁸ Priority driven research incorporates those grants for which funds were set aside targeting a specific disease or health area.

⁹ NHMRC/National Institute for Health Research Collaborative Research Grants.

Environment within which NHMRC operates

NHMRC's work influences and is influenced by a wide range of factors, including:

- trends in the burden of disease, health service delivery and research training environments
- international action in health and medical research and health care
- the role of the states and territories in delivering health services
- the broader economic context.

NHMRC plays a major role in developing Australia's research capabilities, but other crucial participants include universities, hospitals, medical research institutes, professional colleges and the wider public and private sectors. The objects of the NHMRC Act include fostering the development of consistent health standards between the states and territories. NHMRC works with all jurisdictions to build a national approach.

NHMRC works across government on issues of national significance. Among others, NHMRC works closely with the Department of Industry and Science to deliver the *Expediting Clinical Trials Reforms* and *Simplified and Consistent Health and Medical Research* initiatives. NHMRC has also partnered with the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) to develop a new framework for the prioritisation of clinical practice guidelines. Throughout the course of this Plan, NHMRC will continue to build on existing relationships with agencies such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) and Universities Australia (UA), in the area of research integrity.

The Australian Government has established a set of Science and Research Priorities, and corresponding Practical Research Challenges. These will inform NHMRC's work over the period of this Plan. Health is one of the nine priorities (see Box 1) and other priority areas also incorporate issues relevant to health (in particular, those relating to food and to environmental change).

Box 1 - Australian Government Science and Research Priorities: Health

The specific research challenges within the priority of health are:

- better models of health care and services that improve outcomes, reduce disparities for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, increase efficiency and provide greater value for a given expenditure
- improved prediction, identification, tracking, prevention and management of emerging local and regional health threats
- better health outcomes for Indigenous people, with strategies for both urban and regional communities
- effective technologies for individuals to manage their own health care, for example, using mobile apps, remote monitoring and online access to therapies.¹⁰

As demand for NHMRC funding is strong, it is critical that NHMRC's rigorous peer review processes work to ensure excellence in all funded research – whether this is priority driven research or investigator initiated.

NHMRC's range of funding schemes also provides the flexibility necessary for targeting research and capacity building in key areas of need in the health system. Each year NHMRC sets aside a component of the MREA to address identified priorities. NHMRC, through its committees and expert groups, works with a range of national and international partners to identify priorities for research, based on evidence gaps and system needs. The scientific scope of these priority research areas is formed by independent experts and consumers based on the most recent national and international research findings. Priorities are often implemented through additional funding provided for the Centres of Research Excellence (CRE) scheme and through the strategic program of Targeted Calls for Research (TCR).

The expected establishment of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) in 2015-16 will, over time, provide substantial additional funding for medical research and medical innovation.¹¹ Strategic alignment between the funding priorities for the MRFF and those of the NHMRC is essential to ensure the efficient and effective allocation of funds from both sources.

¹⁰ <http://www.science.gov.au/scienceGov/ScienceAndResearchPriorities/Pages/ThePriorities.aspx>

¹¹ Medical Research Future Fund Bill 2015 (Explanatory Memorandum) http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r5397. At the time of writing, the Australian Government plans to distribute more than \$400 million from the MRFF for health and medical research over the next four years, beginning with an initial disbursement of \$10 million in 2015-16.

NHMRC's strategic direction

Major health issues

The NHMRC Act requires the CEO to identify major national health issues likely to arise.

The National Health Priority Areas (NHPAs) have been designated by Australian governments as key targets because of their contribution to the burden of disease in Australia.¹² The NHPAs underpin much of the work undertaken by NHMRC, with funding for research and translation activities being provided across all these areas, reflecting the strengths and interests of researchers. The NHPAs are:

- dementia
- obesity
- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- asthma
- diabetes mellitus
- mental health
- injury prevention and control
- cardiovascular health
- cancer control

Funding for research activities in all of the NHPAs will continue over the four years of this Plan, and if additional major issues arise or substantial gaps in evidence are identified, the NHMRC may initiate targeted calls for research to address these additional priorities.

Examples of NHMRC's strategic investment in designated NHPAs include the current program of work in boosting dementia research and the Targeted Call for Research related to preventing obesity in 18–24 year olds. Our work with domestic and international partners also addresses numerous aspects of the NHPAs: one example is NHMRC's partnership with the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC), which includes in 2015 a NHMRC-NSFC Joint Call for Research to Enhance Prediction and Improve the Treatment of Type 2 Diabetes in China and Australia.

¹² <http://www.aihw.gov.au/national-health-priority-areas/>

In consultation with Council, NHMRC has identified a number of major health issues relevant to the next four years:

- **Create stronger pathways to capture the economic value of research discoveries**

NHMRC will support and promote partnerships between the research sector, industry and the healthcare sector. It will boost the capacity of researchers to commercialise and translate new findings, and support improvements in health services and population health achieved by non-commercial pathways, such as public health policy.

- **Improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

The health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remains a critical issue for Australia. Support of health and medical research and research translation is central to achieving improvements in this area. It is also important to increase the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and recognise the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, and how this diversity relates to health issues in these communities.

- **Harness the power of new technologies to improve health care**

New technologies have enormous potential to improve our understanding of health problems and our ability to address them. This includes improved methodologies and partnerships to use 'big data' to improve health, and innovative approaches and new technologies, such as 'omics', to achieve better health care. New technologies can also be harnessed to ensure up-to-date evidence reaches relevant audiences in the most effective way and to enhance the experience of consumers of health care.

- **Prepare for rapid and unpredictable change**

The health and medical research sector must be ready to respond to new and emerging health threats in our region and internationally. These include those that are already recognised and others that are yet to appear. Antimicrobial resistance and the wider geographical spread of tropical diseases are examples of known threats requiring response, as is the need to understand and address the relationships between environmental factors and health. Collaboration with researchers and health care providers across the world is of particular importance in developing and maintaining our ability to deal with emerging challenges, both in Australia and internationally.

- **Develop and promote robust frameworks to support evidence-based decision-making**

There is a pressing need for evaluation frameworks to support decision-making about investment and/or disinvestment in treatments and care. Australians must have access to the most effective, efficient and sustainable health care system. Embedding evidence into service delivery needs further development, and connections between research and health policy, health systems and clinical care should be strengthened.

- **Address the social, environmental and community dimensions of health**
This issue encompasses environmental and public health, and health services, including the social determinants of health and health inequalities, in terms of both health outcomes and access to health care across the life span. The connections between health literacy and health are also important to understand and tackle.
- **Strengthen the quality of evidence from research**
As research provides the foundation for decision-making about health and health care, it is important that all research is accurate and reproducible. More robust guidance is needed for researchers and institutions on the nature of research misconduct and procedures for managing allegations of misconduct, to maintain research quality and public trust in the research enterprise.

Strategy for health and medical research

NHMRC's strategy for health and medical research addresses the major health issues, including the NHPAs, as well as other functions conferred on the NHMRC by the NHMRC Act. NHMRC will identify projects to progress these priority areas while also continuing to fund high quality health and medical research on broader health-related topics.

The model in Figure 2 depicts this strategy. This model is intended to be illustrative and to be applied in a flexible way, allowing NHMRC to respond to changes in the broader environment.

The themes of investment, translation and integrity represent NHMRC's strategy for health and medical research for the period covered by this Plan. NHMRC will:

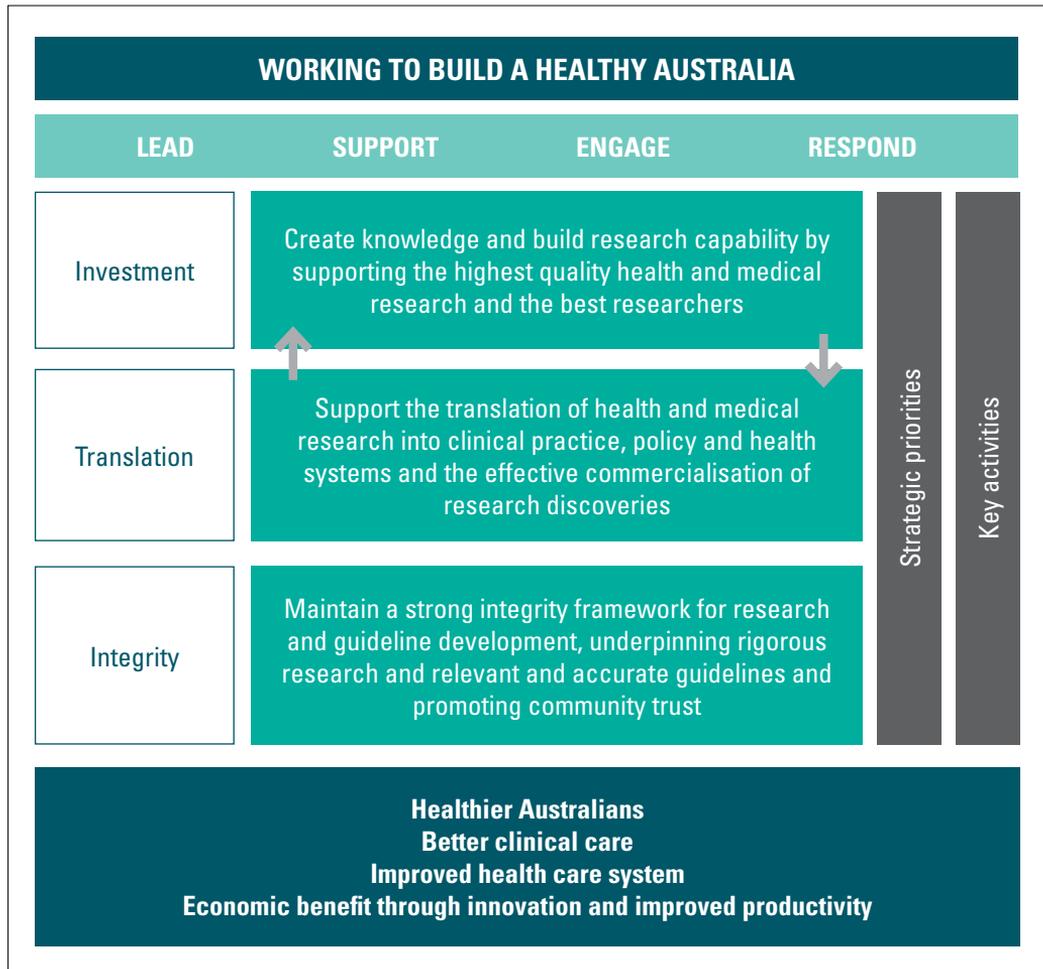
- **invest** in high quality health and medical research and build research capability, supporting the best research and researchers
- support the **translation** of health and medical research into clinical practice, policy and health systems and the effective commercialisation of research discoveries
- maintain a strong **integrity** framework for research and guideline development, underpinning rigorous research and relevant and accurate guidelines and promoting community trust.

To fulfil its mission of working to build a healthy Australia, and to deliver against its strategy, NHMRC will:

- **Lead:** NHMRC is Australia's leader in funding health and medical research and research translation. It develops platforms and standards for health and medical research, and protects the integrity of the government's investment in health and medical research. NHMRC leverages the expertise and resources of others, and promotes translation of research into policy and practice.
- **Support:** NHMRC supports research across the four pillars of health research – biomedical, clinical, public health and health services research, and funds both individuals and teams and the highest quality research and researchers. NHMRC supports diversity of research and researchers across disciplines and sectors and fosters the career development of health and medical researchers.
- **Engage:** NHMRC engages with stakeholders and fosters partnerships among researchers and research funders nationally and internationally, with industry and policy makers and across all levels of government and enables collaborative networks.
- **Respond:** NHMRC responds to national priorities in health and science, to researchers, to consumer needs and community perspectives and to the needs and directions of government.

Within each of the three themes – investment, translation and integrity – NHMRC has identified key priorities for action over the next four years as summarised in the strategic priorities section that follows. These priorities are informed by NHMRC’s operating environment and engagement, and incorporate a focus on the major health issues. The strategic priorities will be implemented through undertaking key activities within each theme.

Figure 2 NHMRC’s strategy for health and medical research



Strategic priorities

Investment

- Support excellence in research across the full spectrum of health and medical research, from basic science through to clinical, public health and health services research, including addressing national and international research priorities via appropriate funding.
- Fund health research related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Examine established funding schemes to determine strengths and identify where improvements could be made.
- Work with others to drive innovation in health and medical research through a range of mechanisms, including through the Health Innovation Advisory Committee (HIAC).
- Analyse the grant application and assessment process to ensure that the system remains fit-for-purpose and results in the best outcomes for knowledge creation and translation.
- Support the work of the NHMRC Women in Health Science Committee, including working with institutions to ensure they meet the requirements of the revised NHMRC Administering Institutions Policy in regard to gender equity.
- Enhance and coordinate research into dementia through the NHMRC National Institute for Dementia Research (NNIDR).
- Support collaborative approaches to health and medical research, domestically and internationally, including connecting, supporting and encouraging links with researchers in non-health related disciplines.
- Work with Austrade and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to implement a collaborative initiative in tropical health research and translation for Northern Australia. This measure will support investment in expanding northern Australian expertise in tropical health by providing funding for research into exotic disease threats to Australia and the region, particularly as this relates to diagnosis, surveillance and response.

Translation

- Drive translation of research into population health and clinical policy and practice so that Australia benefits from its investment in health and medical research, including through the work of the new Health Translation Advisory Committee (HTAC) and the Research Translation Faculty.
- Continue to address evidence-practice gaps by taking opportunities to progress elements of the Research Translation Faculty's Cases for Action.
- Promote the important role of Advanced Health Research and Translation Centres (AHRTCs) in the provision of research-based and evidence-based health care, working with health policy makers nationally to build and expand the AHRTC model.
- Focus on engagement with industry to leverage skills, networks and resources to enhance research and boost commercialisation of research outcomes to benefit health, while working with others to provide health and medical researchers with more skills in research commercialisation.
- Work to ensure that the outcomes of the research NHMRC funds are made available to other researchers and the public as soon as practicable, strengthened by NHMRC's Open Access Policy and aligned with the global open access movement to maximise the benefits derived from research through openly sharing publications and data.
- Develop a new model for guideline development and approval, working in collaboration with national and international guideline development agencies to update standards and promote collaboration tools to foster high quality, rigorously developed, current and relevant guidelines in Australia.
- Develop streamlined approaches to the ethics review and research governance of clinical trials, develop education and training for clinical trials proponents and raise awareness of clinical trials through further development of a fully functional user-friendly clinical trials web portal, using funding from two Government budget initiatives, *Expediting Clinical Trials Reforms* and *Simplified and Consistent Health and Medical Research*.

Integrity

- Work with partners to review the *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research* to ensure that it provides robust guidance on the nature of research misconduct and ways to manage it.
- Lead the development of harmonised procedures and processes across the research sector for managing allegations of misconduct and to strengthen research integrity arrangements both within NHMRC and with external counterparts.
- Lead ongoing revision of key statements, codes and guidelines and develop new guidelines, where relevant, including:
 - » the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research, 2007*
 - » the *Ethical guidelines on the use of assisted reproductive technology in clinical practice and research, June 2007*
 - » *Values and ethics: guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research* and *Keeping research on track: a guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about health research ethics*
 - » Ethical guidelines for organ transplantation from deceased donors.
- Continue to support the development of a national approach to single ethical review for multi-centre research, through the administration of the National Certification Scheme.
- Implement new processes to decrease the burden of red tape on businesses in relation to the Embryo Research Licensing Committee's administration of the RIHE Act and PHCR Act.

Performance: how NHMRC will achieve its purposes

To implement its strategy for health and medical research, the NHMRC will undertake a range of activities and projects over the four year period of this Plan. Delivery strategies for each of the key activities have been developed and will be incorporated into NHMRC's business planning. Performance measures for each key activity over the full four year period are provided below, with specific targets for 2015-16 also being identified for some activities.

This information is not designed to capture the complex details of all NHMRC work; rather its intention is to provide a high-level picture of how major activities over the next four years will deliver on NHMRC's strategy for health and medical research and overall strategic approach. The activities address both the strategic priorities set out in this Plan, as well as the other essential work that NHMRC undertakes to fulfil its purposes.

Performance will be reported in the NHMRC Annual Report to Parliament, with the measures identified here incorporating and supplementing the deliverables and key performance indicators included in the Portfolio Budget Statements. Over the four years covered by the Plan, NHMRC will continue to develop additional metrics to capture progress against these plans and the impact of NHMRC activities. NHMRC monitors its performance throughout the year through a well-established business planning and reporting framework. Many aspects of the agency's ongoing work also incorporate review and improvement of existing policies and processes.

NHMRC activities are supported by robust financial management, record-keeping and reporting processes.

Key activities and performance measures

1. Investment

ACTIVITY 1.1

Activity

1.1 Fund research into Australian health that:

- is of the highest quality and conducted by the best researchers
- includes research that addresses the National Health Priority Areas (NPHAs), the Australian Government Science and Research Priority in Health and other major health issues
- covers the full breadth of health and medical research

Performance

- Allocate 50 per cent of total MREA funding annually to the NHMRC Project Grant scheme.
- Report annually on funding by broad research area, NHPAs and the Australian Government Science and Research Priority in Health, to ensure that funding is appropriately allocated to key areas.
- Examine the role that philanthropic funding plays in supporting health and medical research and how NHMRC could promote leveraging of alternative funding sources.

Targets for 2015-16

- Call for applications addressing a defined research topic to stimulate or greatly advance knowledge in a particular area of health and medical science for the benefit of the health of Australians. To support this initiative, NHMRC will aim to run at least one Targeted Call for Research annually.
- Undertake reviews of established funding programs to determine strengths and identify where improvements can be made.
- Present reviews of established funding programs to Research Committee for consideration and develop a plan for consultation and implementation.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Activity

1.2 Work with others to support the research workforce and build researcher capacity in fields relevant to health and medical research

Performance

- Report annually on the proportion of total MREA funding committed to key people support schemes by research 'pillar', to support this activity and monitor levels of funding.
- Support the work of the NHMRC Women in Health Science Committee, including working with institutions to ensure they meet the requirements of the revised NHMRC Administering Institutions Policy in regard to gender equity.
- Report annually on the percentage of women as Chief Investigators on Project Grants, Program Grants and Research Fellowships.

Activity**1.3 Boost dementia research:**

- Enhance research on dementia and its translation into policy and practice
- Coordinate and translate national dementia research

Performance

- Establish the NHMRC National Institute for Dementia Research (NNIDR).
- Support the Clem Jones Centre for Ageing Dementia Research.
- Work with the Australian Research Council to build dementia research capacity.
- Support large scale research in priority areas for dementia research.

Targets for 2015-16

- NNIDR will identify, by December 2016, priorities, milestones and targets for Australian dementia research, to enable delivery of research programs that address the identified needs.
- NNIDR will undertake at least one additional grant round, with outcomes announced by December 2016, to support priority research.
- Participate in at least one major international dementia program, with outcomes to be announced by December 2016.

Activity**1.4 Support collaborative, multidisciplinary approaches to solving health problems, including supporting Australia's participation in international research****Performance**

- Promote and review management of multidisciplinary funding proposals, ensuring that appropriate systems are in place to incorporate and assess contributions from disciplines outside the health and medical field, including physics, engineering and mathematics.
- Work with Austrade and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to ensure a coordinated approach to NHMRC's call for applications from consortia of research institutions to undertake a collaborative, multidisciplinary tropical health research program by December 2015, in order to implement an initiative in tropical health research and translation for Northern Australia.
- Develop an international engagement strategy to guide decisions on new collaborations with the draft strategy to be finalised by January 2016.
- Finalise collaborative research funding with at least two international organisations by 2016 to address global health issues of relevance to our region.

ACTIVITY 1.5**Activity**

1.5 Participate in developing national strategies for research infrastructure investment, including collaborative, priority-driven approaches

Performance

- Continue discussions with the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Industry and Science to develop policies for national research infrastructure investment that will reduce duplication and encourage collaboration.
- Aim to award eligible Independent Medical Research Institutes (iMRIs) approximately 20c per dollar of the total yearly value of grants held by each iMRI in order to continue supporting health and medical research infrastructure.

ACTIVITY 1.6**Activity**

1.6 Support research that will provide better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Performance

- Commit at least five per cent of the annual MREA allocation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research and researchers.
- Report annually on the percentage of grants awarded each year that address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health challenges and that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers as a Chief Investigator.
- Support the NHMRC Principal Committee Indigenous Caucus (PCIC) and seek its advice on strategies.

Targets for 2015-16

- Conduct a one day forum to identify evidence-practice gaps.

ACTIVITY 1.7**Activity**

1.7 Promote access to and use of 'big data' to improve health

Performance

- Continue to contribute to the discussion regarding the use of 'big data' by engaging in collaborative meetings/workshops with relevant Australian and international groups (e.g. the Global Alliance for Genomics and Health).
- Continue to encourage data sharing practices to maximise the benefits derived from NHMRC-funded research.
- Continue to refine guidance for researchers to consider data and metadata management when planning and conducting research by regularly reviewing relevant guidelines.

Targets for 2015-16

- Finalise and release the *NHMRC Principles for accessing and using publicly funded data for health research*.

Activity

1.8 Continually improve the grant application and peer review processes and reduce red tape for researchers

Performance

- Continue to review aspects of the peer review process to maximise the excellence and efficiency of the peer review system and to manage the burden on peer reviewers.

Targets for 2015-16

- Work towards an improved and consistent application process and streamlined reporting system, including:
 - » Commence implementation of a new application front end to the Research Grants Management System (RGMS).
 - » Successfully implementing video conferencing for panel meetings where appropriate, with the first successful Go Live Grant Review Panel (GRP) to be held by October 2015.
 - » Trialling a streamlined peer review process for key funding schemes by June 2016.
 - » Commence implementation of self-service reporting capability to make NHMRC grant data more easily accessible.

2. Translation

ACTIVITY 2.1

Activity

2.1 Support translational research, including research focused on the National Health Priority Areas, the Australian Government Science and Research Priority in Health and other major health issues

Performance

- Support translation-related research activities through a range of funding schemes.
- Work with Austrade and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to implement a collaborative initiative in tropical health research and translation for Northern Australia, developing a coordinated approach to the measure, with at least three meetings involving these stakeholders by December 2015.

Targets for 2015-16

- Establish the Health Translation Advisory Committee (HTAC) and work program informed by Council.
- Support priority-driven research through:
 - » Finalising the peer review of applications to the TCR in obesity by December 2015.
 - » Calling for applications for a CRE in infectious disease by December 2015.
 - » Finalising arrangements with A*Star in respect of a call for applications addressing obesity and metabolic disease by December 2015.
 - » Calling for applications from consortia of research institutions to undertake a multidisciplinary tropical health research program by December 2015.
 - » Undertaking at least one dementia-focused grant round with outcomes announced by December 2016.

Activity

2.2 Provide national leadership in promoting translation of knowledge created through research into clinical practice, health policy, health services and systems and public health and expand Australia's capabilities in research translation

Performance

- Work with states and territories, non-government organisations and the private sector to fund Partnerships for Better Health projects and centres.
- Continue to promote the important role of Advanced Health Research and Translation Centres (AHRTCs) in the provision of research-based and evidence-based health care, and provide opportunities for recognition of additional Centres. Engage with the sector to further develop the initiative, including via a stakeholder workshop with existing and potential AHRTCs.
- Continue to address evidence-practice gaps by taking opportunities to progress elements of the Research Translation Faculty's Cases for Action.
- Work with the Commonwealth and states and territories to identify and progress advice on issues of mutual concern.
- Work with Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) to develop research preparedness in response to infectious disease threats to health.
- Publish an updated *Statement on consumer and community participation in health and medical research*.

Targets for 2015-16

- Establish the Health Translation Advisory Committee (HTAC) and work program informed by Council.
- Host the Fourth Research Translation Symposium.
- Host a stakeholder workshop to facilitate discussion and feedback on the AHRTC initiative.
- Accept key research priorities identified and presented by NNIDR.
- Commence a review of the *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*.
- Finalise review on the health effects of water fluoridation.
- Work with ACSQHC to update the *Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare*.
- Provide research evidence and advice to the Government as needed.

Activity

2.3 Maintain a leadership role in the development of public and environmental health and clinical advice designed to prevent illness, improve health, enhance clinical care and support the states and territories in achieving consistent standards

Performance

- Release third party guidelines approved by Council that meet the *Procedures and requirements for meeting the 2011 NHMRC standard for clinical practice guidelines*.
- Develop and approve guidelines or health advice that address priority clinical, public and environmental health topics.
- Report on the quality of Australian clinical practice guidelines through the national clinical practice guideline portal and dataset reports.

Targets for 2015-16

- Progress a new guideline development standard and methodology, including greater use of contemporary information technology platforms in collaboration with national and international agencies.

Activity

2.4 Work with others to remove barriers to commercialisation and innovation in health and enhance NHMRC funding schemes and strategic projects to forge stronger links with industry

Performance

- Report annually on the number of grants awarded each year through the Development Grants scheme and on the number of industry-focused Career Development fellowships awarded each year.
- Strengthen rules for competitive grant programs to appropriately recognise industry-relevant expertise or research by revising the NHMRC Funding Rules and related program documentation by November 2015, supporting implementation of the 'Boosting the Commercial Returns from Research' strategy.
- Work with others to identify opportunities for education of researchers in skills related to commercialisation.
- Continue to confer a Marshall and Warren award annually for highly innovative Project Grants, in support of building an innovative health industry.

Targets for 2015-16

- Establish the Health Innovation Advisory Committee and its work plan on advice from Council.
- Report on the proportion of the total annual MREA budget committed to research-translation focussed funding programs.
- Report annually on the percentage of Project Grants awarded each year with a 'significance and/or innovation' category score of 5 or more, to highlight the proportion of grants that foster innovation.

Activity

2.5 Implement the Government's initiatives of *Expediting Clinical Trials Reforms* and *Simplified and Consistent Health and Medical Research*, including increasing the capability of the academic clinical trial workforce through the development of education and training programs and a fully functional clinical trials web portal

Performance

- Streamline ethical review and research governance processes for clinical trials.

Targets for 2015-16

- Continue to :
 - » Develop and launch an improved ethics application form.
 - » Conduct pilot studies to collect data on a good practice research governance process for clinical trials.
 - » Develop a market driven approach to demonstrate quality, safety, transparency and efficiency of clinical trials.
 - » Work with stakeholders to develop contemporary guidance around safety monitoring and reporting requirements for clinical trials.
 - » Work to develop a fully functional clinical trials web portal.

3. Integrity

ACTIVITY 3.1	<p>Activity 3.1 Retain high ethical standards in health and medical research and health care and promote trust in research</p> <p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work in close partnership with other organisations, including the Australian Research Council, universities and the research community, to promote adherence to agreed standards in ethics and the conduct of research.• Work towards national adoption of the National Approach to Single Ethical Review (formerly known as HoMER). <p>Targets for 2015-16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aim for 100 per cent of institutions to maintain certification requirements, determined by monitoring the number of Human Research Ethics Committees participating in the NHMRC National Certification Scheme.
ACTIVITY 3.2	<p>Activity 3.2 Strengthen the process for managing research misconduct and raise awareness of issues of ethics and integrity in the research sector</p> <p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with administering institutions to prevent research misconduct and investigate complaints. <p>Targets for 2015-16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lead revision of the <i>Australian code for the responsible conduct of research, 2007</i> to provide stronger guidance and encourage harmonisation of research integrity processes across the sector.• Undertake public consultation on a draft of the <i>Australian code for the responsible conduct of research, 2007</i>.• Revise and release the NHMRC policy on misconduct related to NHMRC-funded research.
ACTIVITY 3.3	<p>Activity 3.3 Continue review of research ethics standards and guidelines</p> <p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure statements, codes and guidelines remain up-to-date and reflect best practice. <p>Targets for 2015-16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complete review of Section 3 of the <i>National statement on ethical conduct in human research, 2007</i>.• Complete review of <i>Ethical guidelines on the use of assisted reproductive technology in clinical practice and research, June 2007</i>.• Complete the ethical guidelines for organ transplantation from deceased donors.• Undertake public consultation on the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research ethics guidelines.

Activity

3.4 Administer the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002* and the *Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction Act 2002*

Performance

- Aim for stakeholders to demonstrate continued understanding of regulatory requirements as measured by NHMRC assessment of activity reports and inspection outcomes.

Targets for 2015-16

- Implement new processes to decrease the burden of red tape on businesses.

Notes

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