



10 March 2021

The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health and Aged Care
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Statement of Intent

Dear Minister,

I am writing to describe how the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) will meet your expectations, with a focus on the next 12 months, as outlined in your letter of 23 November 2020. This letter presents my Statement of Intent.

NHMRC plays a unique role in the Australian health system, set out in the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992* (NHMRC Act). As the Government's lead agency for funding health and medical research, NHMRC invests in the creation of new knowledge about the origins, prevention and treatment of disease and the promotion of health and wellbeing. Through clinical, public health and environmental health guidelines and other pathways, NHMRC supports the translation of research into health practice and policy. By providing guidance on responsible research practices and ethical issues, NHMRC fosters the highest standards of ethics and integrity in the conduct of research and the delivery of health care.

Over its 84 years, NHMRC has become a cornerstone of Australia's research system and a critical contributor to the outstanding international reputation of our researchers and research institutions. In turn, the strength of the research sector has underpinned our national capability to respond to Australia's particular health needs and to new health challenges. It has helped to make us one of the healthiest countries in the world.

NHMRC's longstanding approach is to deliver funding that builds the foundations of the national health and medical research system – an excellent biomedical, clinical, public health and health systems research workforce; high-quality research along the pipeline from discovery to implementation; national and international partnerships between disciplines and with the community, health providers and industry. Through a mix of investigator-initiated and targeted research, NHMRC supports research across the broad range of health and medical needs. Today, as a result, Australia has research capability both in areas of greatest disease burden and at the frontiers of knowledge and technology that enable us to respond quickly to new challenges and opportunities.

The introduction of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) is rapidly and dramatically changing the health and medical research landscape. As a priority-driven research fund, its success depends on the foundations of research excellence and capability built with NHMRC funding. NHMRC will continue to support this broad base to underpin and complement the MRFF's research missions and programs and to ensure Australia can meet its present and future health challenges.

VISION

NHMRC's vision is to improve the health of the Australian community by supporting the conduct of excellent health and medical research and its translation into policy and practice. This vision continues to guide NHMRC's immediate and longer-term planning to fulfil its legislated obligations and functions.

NHMRC's legislated roles are reflected in its Corporate Plan 2020-21 in which its actions are aligned to three strategic themes: **investment**, **translation** and **integrity**. Community involvement is essential to NHMRC's strategy for health and medical research and all three strategic themes draw on the lived experience of consumers and the community.

PRIORITIES

Investment

NHMRC seeks to obtain the greatest benefit for the Australian community from its investment in health and medical research by supporting a diversified portfolio of grants that:

- fund across the spectrum of health and medical research – from the laboratory to the clinic and the community
- invest in people with outstanding research achievement and promise to build national research capability
- support the most innovative research to solve complex problems
- support research at different scales – from individuals to teams, centres and national networks
- meet specific strategic objectives, such as international collaboration, partnership with end-users and commercialisation.

NHMRC's grant program supports both investigator-initiated and priority-driven research across all areas of biomedical science and health, with schemes structured to achieve specific goals – such as the funding of new ideas, clinical trials and cohort studies, or proof-of-concept studies to support commercial development. We balance the needs of the community, government and the research sector and we encourage meaningful engagement between researchers and the community at all stages of research.

Multidisciplinary and collaborative research. NHMRC's grant program is designed to give research teams the flexibility to form collaborations, integrate disciplines and adjust focus as required to solve significant health and medical problems. The Australian Partnership for Preparedness Research on Infectious Disease Emergencies (APPRISE) is an example of a pre-existing, NHMRC-funded national Centre of Research Excellence with strong international links that has played a crucial role in the research response to COVID-19.

Three significant NHMRC initiatives will commence funding in 2021-2022: a National Network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Researchers; a multidisciplinary, collaborative national network to improve health outcomes for people living with mental illness; and a special initiative to improve Australia's preparedness for and responsiveness to human health threats from changing environmental conditions and extreme weather events. Each initiative has been co-designed with the research community to drive collaboration across the health system and with the community, and build research capacity in areas of national need.

Support for early and mid-career researchers. NHMRC's grant program offers opportunities for talented researchers at all career stages, particularly through the Investigator Grant and Ideas Grant schemes. Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early and mid-career researchers, NHMRC increased funding for Ideas Grants in 2020 and will provide additional Investigator Grants for this cohort in 2021. We will continue to monitor the impact of the pandemic on early and mid-career researchers as we emerge from the pandemic and will consider further targeted support as required.

Support for women. NHMRC has implemented a range of initiatives to foster gender equity in NHMRC-funded research and is currently renewing its *Gender Equality Strategy*. The most far-reaching of these initiatives is the allocation of structural priority funding to support additional high-quality applications led by women. This direct intervention has enabled parity or near parity of funded rates for women and men in major grant schemes and will continue while it is still needed.

NHMRC recognises that individual circumstances, such as caring responsibilities and disability, can greatly affect a researcher's track record. For grant schemes where applicant track record is a selection criterion, NHMRC requires that peer reviewers assess track records 'relative to opportunity'. NHMRC released a revised *Relative to Opportunity Policy* in early 2021 to clarify the considerations to be taken into account by reviewers, including personal circumstances such as disability and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, bushfires and other calamities.

National and international engagement. NHMRC works with domestic and international partners, including other government agencies and non-government and philanthropic organisations, to capture emerging national and international scientific opportunities and to ensure alignment with the Government's broader agenda.

NHMRC engages internationally to achieve better outcomes for the Australian community and build national research capability, as outlined in its *International Engagement Strategy 2021-2023*. NHMRC's participation in funding calls with international partners creates opportunities for Australian researchers to collaborate internationally, leverage international expertise and funding, and contribute to improvements in global health. For example, our participation in the Global Alliance for Chronic Diseases and the e-ASIA Joint Research Program strengthens Australian research engagement in our region. Membership of the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness (GloPID-R) has provided NHMRC-funded researchers with opportunities to collaborate and share information before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NHMRC is supporting the Department of Health to investigate international funding opportunities for the MRFF, for example in research on rare diseases and cancer, including Australian involvement in the Cancer Grand Challenges initiative.

In early 2021, NHMRC will seek to extend its existing relationship with the philanthropic sector when it releases a *Prospectus for Philanthropic Organisations* outlining how such organisations can partner with NHMRC to increase support for health and medical research.

Targeted research investment. NHMRC makes targeted investments through special initiatives, as outlined above, and through Targeted Calls for Research to meet specific needs identified by government and the community. The selection of topics takes into account other government research funding, such as the MRFF, to ensure complementarity.

A continuing overarching priority across the whole grant program is the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and researchers to improve Indigenous health outcomes. This support is delivered through a variety of mechanisms, including structural priority funding, Targeted Calls for Research and the new National Network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Researchers.

Monitoring and evaluation of the grant program. NHMRC's reformed grant program is now in its third year of operation. Data from each grant round are analysed and published on the NHMRC website. Feedback is sought from Council, Principal Committees and the research sector. A formal evaluation framework has been established to assess outcomes against the program's objectives over the coming years.

A critical element in the implementation of the grant program is *peer review* – the process by which independent experts evaluate and rate grant applications. NHMRC continues to streamline its peer review processes to strike an appropriate balance between the rigour of review and the burden on reviewers. In 2021, NHMRC is expanding training for reviewers and introducing a streamlined peer review process for the Ideas Grant Scheme to improve matching of reviewers to applications, ensuring the right expertise is available to judge the excellence of research proposals. A range of data sources will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of these changes.

Sapphire. NHMRC’s delivery of its grant program, as well as its work as a grants hub for the MRFF and other areas of government, relies on our grants management system to handle every stage in the pathway from application to peer review, development of funding recommendations, award and post-award grant management. NHMRC expects to complete the transition from its Research Grants Management System to its new system, Sapphire, during 2021. Ongoing refinement will be guided by feedback from applicants, peer reviewers, research institutions and funding partners.

Once fully developed, Sapphire will also provide enhanced evaluation and data capabilities for monitoring the performance of all grants administered by NHMRC.

Translation

All NHMRC grant schemes offer support for translational research that aims to create new diagnostics, therapies, interventions and policies, particularly by funding those stages in the research and development pipeline that normally cannot attract private investment. NHMRC also pursues a range of strategies to promote research translation into clinical practice, policy and health systems and support the commercialisation of research discoveries.

Engagement with policy makers, industry, health service providers, consumers and communities. NHMRC uses several mechanisms to foster early engagement between researchers and a range of end-users to drive translation of research into policy and practice. For example, the Partnership Project scheme specifically supports researchers and end-user partners, such as health care providers and policy makers, to work together to define questions, undertake research, and interpret and implement the findings.

NHMRC grant guidelines and supporting policies, such as the *Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria* and the *Toolkit for Consumer and Community Involvement in Health and Medical Research (2020)*, also promote and provide guidance on engagement with consumers and communities in the planning and conduct of research.

NHMRC’s Translation Centres initiative was established to encourage and recognise centres of collaboration that excel in the provision of research-based health care and training. The ten NHMRC-accredited centres (seven Advanced Health Research and Translation Centres and three Centres for Innovation in Regional Health) bring together researchers, health care providers, education and training to improve the health and wellbeing of patients and the populations they serve. The Centres for Innovation in Regional Health have a special role in extending this approach to regional and remote areas.

Guidelines. NHMRC’s leadership role in the development and approval of public health, environmental health and clinical guidelines offers a trusted pathway for the translation of research evidence into policy and practice, which is relied on by jurisdictions and the health sector. For example, NHMRC is commencing a review of the *Australian Dietary Guidelines*, an important resource for the public, health professionals, policy makers, educators and industry. Rolling review of the *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines* and revision of the *CEO Statement on E-Cigarettes* are in progress.

Increasing value and impact. Recognising that ‘you get what you measure’, NHMRC is working with the research sector to shift the focus from traditional measures of academic output towards research outcomes and impact. Peer review of the track records of applicants to two major NHMRC grant schemes now includes evaluation of the impact of their past research on knowledge, health, the economy and society. While publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals remains a primary measure of research quality and an essential step in the production, evaluation and communication of research, the new emphasis on impact is expected to change how researchers plan their research and encourage their early engagement with end-users to achieve their goals. This initiative at the level of the individual researcher complements the Government’s assessment of engagement and impact of university research at the institutional level.

Commercialisation of new technologies is a critical pathway to research impact. NHMRC will continue to support research commercialisation through its established Development Grant scheme, funding researchers to obtain the proof-of-concept data needed for commercial development of new medical products, processes, procedures and services.

NHMRC will continue to build its library of *Impact Case Studies* that showcase the wide-ranging outcomes of NHMRC-funded research and illustrate the journey from discovery to impact, whether through commercialisation or improved disease prevention and care.

NHMRC Council, Principal Committees and other advisory groups are valuable sources of advice, insight and connection to other sectors as NHMRC seeks to increase the value and impact of the research it funds. This focus will be strengthened by the new Health Research Impact Committee (HRIC) to be appointed for the 2021-2024 triennium. HRIC will advise on policies and strategies to promote, communicate and measure the impact of NHMRC-funded research, as well as strategies to facilitate research translation into clinical, public health and commercial outcomes. My membership of the MRFF Australian Medical Research Advisory Board (AMRAB) also provides insights into the needs of the research sector and the wider community that will continue to inform NHMRC’s research strategy.

Integrity

NHMRC’s role in Australian health and medical research is strengthened and enriched by its leadership in the development of ethical guidance for the conduct of research and the delivery of health care. NHMRC also serves the wider community in considering the ethical issues presented by advances in biomedicine and health care.

Research ethics and integrity. Research rigour, transparency and reproducibility underpin the advancement of science, the translation of research into practical outcomes and community confidence in our health system. NHMRC will continue to promote the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* and monitor its application by institutions and researchers. Implementation of NHMRC’s *Research Quality Strategy* will support the improvement of sector practice by focusing on the education and training of researchers, and by providing guidance for institutions on the conduct of high quality research.

NHMRC will continue its rolling review of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* to ensure that Australian health and medical research meets the highest standards of ethical design, review and conduct. We will also continue to oversee human research ethics committees and support for institutions in the development of consistent ethics review processes through the Human Research Ethics Application online tool.

NHMRC provides timely, evidence-based leadership and advice on ethical matters relating to health. For example, since May 2020, NHMRC’s Australian Health Ethics Committee has been consulting health consumers and other stakeholders on an ethical decision-making framework to support the public health, clinical and research response to COVID-19 and future pandemics. The framework will be released shortly.

As a major Australian Government funder of the health and medical research sector, NHMRC will support awareness of the threat of foreign interference in the research sector and the implementation of the *Guidelines to Counter Foreign Interference in the Australian University Sector*. This will be balanced against the need to promote international research engagement and collaboration to advance human health.

Regulation of research involving human embryos. NHMRC continues to administer the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002* and the *Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction Act 2002* and will work closely with the Department of Health to support the planned introduction of mitochondrial donation in Australia. The Embryo Research Licensing Committee and the Australian Health Ethics Committee will also monitor and advise on other developments in human reproductive technology with clinical potential.

Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF)

A major priority for NHMRC is supporting the Department of Health to deliver MRFF programs, leveraging NHMRC's expertise and capabilities in peer review and grants management. We have increased our capacity and will continue to refine NHMRC's grants hub service offering to support the effective and efficient delivery of MRFF grant opportunities, including urgent funding calls, as was required to support the Government's research response to the 2019-2020 bushfires and COVID-19.

The AMRAB Chair's role on NHMRC Council and my role on AMRAB, along with the close working relationship between the Department of Health and NHMRC, are serving to streamline and coordinate the delivery of government resources to support the MRFF's Strategy and Priorities.

RELATIONSHIP WITH MINISTER AND PORTFOLIO

NHMRC will continue to provide you, as Minister for Health, and the Government with accurate and timely advice on significant issues in health and medical research, evidence-based health advice and important operational matters, and to consult you early in the development of future work.

We will continue to work closely with the Department of Health, including working together to strengthen Australia's health and medical research sector and to translate evidence into health policy and practice.

NHMRC Council is briefed by the Department of Health on the Government's health and medical research policy direction. NHMRC also works closely with the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer (CMO), who is a standing member of the Council, on public health matters.

NHMRC is continuing to provide secretariat and project support to the National COVID-19 Health and Research Advisory Committee (NCHRAC), which advises the CMO on the public health response to the pandemic. NHMRC works closely with the Deputy CMO as NCHRAC co-chair to ensure that the committee delivers evidence-informed expert advice on urgent questions at the CMO's request.

ORGANISATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

NHMRC operates within a strong governance framework that supports effective performance, integrity, efficiency and compliance with our legislated responsibilities under the NHMRC Act and the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act).

NHMRC Council and Principal Committees. I am supported in fulfilling my functions under the NHMRC Act by the expert and independent advice of NHMRC Council and its Principal Committees. Through Council and its committees, researchers, health care professionals



and consumers contribute to the work of NHMRC and provide a bridge to the community and the research and health sectors. I look forward to supporting you to review the membership and formalise appointments to the Council and Principal Committees for the forthcoming 2021-2024 triennium.

Compliance. As NHMRC's Accountable Authority under the PGPA Act, I take seriously my responsibilities to govern NHMRC properly, including ensuring the proper use of public resources and maintaining systems of risk oversight and management and internal control. NHMRC will continue to meet all governance, performance and accountability requirements of the PGPA Act applicable to a non-corporate Commonwealth entity. Within these requirements, NHMRC will retain the flexibility to respond to emerging priorities and issues as they arise.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

NHMRC is accountable to you, as the Minister for Health, and to the Parliament of Australia. As required by the NHMRC Act, I will consult you on the matters proposed for inclusion in NHMRC's Corporate Plan, which is expected to set out a national strategy for health and medical research and the major national health issues likely to arise over the period of the plan. The Corporate Plan also outlines NHMRC's strategic and operational priorities, activities and performance measures. I will provide the plan to the Minister for Finance and to you to be tabled in the Parliament. I will also present you with an Annual Report in line with legislated requirements for tabling in the Parliament.

Thank you for this opportunity to reflect the Government's priorities through NHMRC's Statement of Intent. We appreciate your trust in NHMRC's leadership in advancing the Government's vision for health and medical research.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Anne Kelso AO
Chief Executive Officer