



The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the
Public Service and Cabinet

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Statement of Expectations

Dear Professor

I am writing to outline my expectations of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), with a focus on the next 12 months. This outline will assist with the Australian Government's commitment to effective governance and performance of NHMRC, guided by the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act).

VISION

I would like to emphasise the objectives of NHMRC outlined in the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992* (Act). NHMRC is the Australian Government's key entity for managing investment in, and the integrity of, health and medical research. NHMRC is responsible for funding high-quality health and medical research, building research capability, developing evidence-based health advice for the Australian community, health professionals and governments, supporting the translation of health and medical research into better health outcomes and promoting the highest standards of ethics and integrity in health and medical research.

The rationale for Government investment in health and medical research is to leverage the fullest possible benefits that can be derived from participating in, supporting, promoting and achieving excellence in health and medical research, and NHMRC is central to that effort, reflected clearly in the legislation.

This outline should also guide longer-term planning for NHMRC in fulfilling its obligations and functions outlined in the Act, including advice and implementation of Government priorities for health and medical research.

Together, we have developed a vision for health and medical research in Australia, as outlined in NHMRC's Corporate Plan.

PRIORITIES

Investment in health and medical research

NHMRC is a world leader in supporting the creation of health knowledge and its translation into policy and practice for the benefit of Australians and the global community. NHMRC is well-placed to support the highest quality health and medical research and the best researchers to meet the health needs of Australians. NHMRC has recently undertaken a major reform of its grant program to help meet this objective.

I am keen that NHMRC promotes a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to health and medical research. It is important that NHMRC works across disciplines, professions, sectors and geographic borders to meet health and health system needs and capture emerging national and international scientific opportunities. This has been especially highlighted by the national response to the 2019–20 bushfires and the global response to the COVID-19 outbreak, both of which have required an unprecedented level of national and international responsiveness and collaboration to develop solutions to major health priorities.

In acknowledging the challenges currently facing the health and medical research sector, I ask that NHMRC continue to look for ways to support early and mid-career researchers and women in the sector, as well as the sector more broadly as it recovers from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. I ask you to work closely with the sector to monitor emerging trends and be flexible in developing approaches that support the best possible outcomes, particularly for our future researchers.

I request that you continue to engage with my Department, other government agencies, non-government organisations and philanthropic organisations with an interest in health and medical research and to integrate with the broader Government innovation agenda. I also ask that you continue to engage internationally through strategic bilateral and multilateral arrangements, such as the Global Alliance for Chronic Diseases and the e-ASIA Joint Research Program, to create opportunities for Australian researchers to develop new collaborations that contribute to global health research. Please also consider how the NHMRC can collaborate with my Department to investigate the potential means, and promotion, of Australian involvement in the Cancer Grand Challenges initiative.

NHMRC is a significant investor in both investigator-led research and priority-driven research. I acknowledge NHMRC's ongoing focus on strategic priorities and areas for targeted research investment, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, mental health, dementia and other chronic conditions and resilience to environmental change, emerging health threats and emergencies.

NHMRC's new grant program is intended to encourage innovation and creativity, provide opportunities for talented researchers at all career stages and minimise application and peer review burden on researchers. I ask that you continue to monitor and evaluate the grant program against these aspirations, paying attention to outcomes for sectors of the research workforce under particular pressure: women, early and mid-career researchers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

Translation, collaboration and commercialisation

The translation of knowledge into applications is vital for a competitive, innovative economy and improved social and environmental outcomes. NHMRC has an important role to play in driving translation of research knowledge and effective commercialisation of research discoveries to improve health care and the health status of all Australians.

I would like to see a continued emphasis on early engagement of researchers with policy makers, industry, health service providers, consumers and communities to leverage skills, networks and resources that drive translation of evidence from health and medical research into public, environmental and clinical health policies and practices that benefit all Australians. NHMRC's role in the development and approval of public health, environmental health and clinical guidelines remains a critical pathway for translation of evidence into policy and practice.

I ask that you continue to work with the Council, Principal Committees and other NHMRC advisory committees to strengthen collaboration across sectors and promote new opportunities for researchers, policy makers and industry to work together to increase the value and impact of NHMRC-funded research.

Your role as a member of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) Australian Medical Research Advisory Board (AMRAB) provides an opportunity for you to draw on the comprehensive feedback received through public consultations on the Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy and Priorities. I ask that you consider the insights received through those consultations in setting NHMRC's priorities to meet the needs of the research sector and the wider community.

Integrity and ethics

NHMRC has a national leadership role in encouraging and promoting ethical conduct and integrity in research, which is critical to ensuring rigour, transparency and reproducibility in health and medical research and maintaining community confidence in its outputs. I ask that NHMRC continue to monitor the application of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, which guides institutions and researchers in responsible research practices and promotes research integrity.

I also welcome NHMRC's Research Quality Strategy, which provides a long-term vision for identifying the enablers and barriers and for rewarding excellence in research quality, a focus on the education and training of researchers, and guidance for institutions on conducting high-quality research.

I ask that you continue to support streamlined research governance and ethics review processes, including through the rolling review of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, which sets out the requirements for the ethical design, review and conduct of human research. NHMRC also has a critical role in registering human research ethics committees and supporting consistent ethics review processes through the Human Research Ethics Application online tool.

NHMRC has an ongoing role to play in providing evidence-based leadership and advice on ethical matters relating to health, including matters arising from new scientific advances.

I also ask that you continue to administer and implement the *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002* and the *Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction Act 2002*, including supporting my Department with advice on ethical and legal considerations for the introduction of mitochondrial donation as needed.

Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF)

The MRFF is an important source of Government investment in health and medical research in Australia. It has a strong translational focus, with an intent to strengthen health system sustainability and promote medical innovation to benefit the health and wellbeing of all Australians. This has been particularly evident this year as the MRFF continues to invest in priority research to support Australia's bushfire response and, more recently, the Government's research response to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak.

I ask that you continue to share NHMRC's expertise in peer review and grants management to help administer high quality, transformational research in line with the MRFF's specific objectives. Through your membership of AMRAB, I also ask that you participate in fulfilling the Strategies and Priorities of the MRFF in a way that makes best use of government resources and streamlines engagement between the NHMRC, the MRFF and the research sector. I encourage you to continue to work closely with my Department to provide effective and efficient support for relevant MRFF investments that leverage NHMRC's expertise and capabilities.

Sapphire

NHMRC has invested significantly in a redeveloped end-to-end grants management solution, Sapphire, with the intent to support NHMRC's grant program, streamline application and assessment processes, and enhance NHMRC's measurement and reporting of research impact. I strongly support co-operation across the health and medical research sector to ensure Sapphire responds to stakeholder needs, and encourage you to evaluate its success according to these principles.

RELATIONSHIP WITH MINISTER AND PORTFOLIO

NHMRC plays an essential role in ensuring that I, as Minister for Health, and the Government are well placed to respond promptly to issues that may arise in health and medical research.

NHMRC should therefore provide Government with accurate and timely advice on significant issues in its core area of business. Significant issues might include matters for which the Government is likely to be accountable in Parliament and important operational or budgetary issues. I would also expect you to work closely with my Department in contributing to ongoing policy advice and ideas to strengthen our visions for health and medical research in Australia.

In this context I am looking forward to maintaining my close working relationship with the NHMRC and Council. I request that I, and my Department, are consulted early in the development process for future work, and I will ensure you are fully informed of the Government's policy direction as specific initiatives and strategies are considered. The Government expects NHMRC and my Department will continue to maintain a close working relationship.

I also expect the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer's membership of the NHMRC Council, as stipulated in the Act, will assist in building an effective working relationship and communications between NHMRC and Government.

ORGANISATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

I note that we will need to work together to review the membership of the NHMRC Council as part of establishing new arrangements for the next triennium. In light of recent public scrutiny of the governance of some Commonwealth instrumentalities, we need to ensure we meet the requirements of the legislation and also remain cognisant of community expectations.

I expect NHMRC to continue to comply with the principles of the Commonwealth Resource Management Framework as specified in the PGPA Act, and to give effect to the governance, performance and accountability requirements covered by the PGPA Act applicable to a non-corporate, Commonwealth entity.

Furthermore, my expectation is that NHMRC maintains the capacity to be flexible and responsive to emerging priorities and issues which might arise throughout the year.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

NHMRC is accountable to the Minister for Health and to the Parliament.

In accordance with the PGPA Act and the NHMRC Act, I expect you to develop a corporate plan and to provide this to me, as the responsible portfolio Minister, and the Minister for Finance, Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham to be tabled in Parliament. I also expect you to develop an annual report to be provided to me, as the responsible portfolio Minister, to be tabled in Parliament.

I would appreciate your response to this letter in the form of a Statement of Intent within the next three months outlining how NHMRC proposes to meet the expectations outlined herein, and ensure that the Government's priorities are reflected in NHMRC's strategic and operational plans. NHMRC has a leadership role in advancing the Government's vision for health and medical research and I am keen to understand how NHMRC's new strategic direction will help build a healthy Australia.

To enable greater transparency and accountability information in this letter along with your response will be published and made publicly available.

Yours sincerely



Greg Hunt