

Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy 2021-2026 and the related Australian Medical Research and Innovation Priorities Consultation Guide, September 2021

The University's responses to the Australian Medical Research Advisory Board's consultation questions - submitted via the Department of Health's online Consultation Hub on 11 October 2021

STRATEGY

1. Could the current Strategy be altered to better meet the purpose set out in the MRFF Act? If so, how?

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on integrated solutions to the common root causes (biological, environmental and socioeconomic) of multiple preventable diseases and unhealthy ageing that have both exacerbated COVID-19 and together risk the sustainability of the health system over coming decades.

Based on existing MRFF schemes, areas to target include: (a) community-driven, culturally safe Indigenous health research (b) health system improvements and sustainability, including research that drives efficiency and effectiveness, meets the needs of diverse groups, and addresses gaps and inequalities to ensure that all Australians can access the best healthcare (c) women's health (d) ageing (e) health promotion (including nutritional, dental and mental health) and consumer behaviour (f) research into promoting the development of new therapeutic interventions to address priority health concerns.

There are also concerns that transparency and evaluation via the current mechanisms are limited. MRFF strategy is assessed against five impact measures, which are conceptual in nature. Quantitative evaluation should be built into each scheme to enable impact and improvements related to MRFF funding to continue to be assessed and to determine the MRFF's overall impact in translating research into clinical practice.

2. What are the most critical current and future issues and factors impacting on the health system, including primary prevention, and on the health and medical research sector that the next Strategy needs to address?

Critical issues and factors impacting on the health system include:

- Increasing access to existing health programs and services, particularly in primary prevention. More research is needed to streamline and enhance these programs so they have wider benefit and efficacy.
- Increasing the availability and application of telehealth solutions, where adapting or adding telehealth technologies can maximise reach and uptake.
- Increasing population health and health services research to drive translation of research; for example, into the longer-term impacts of delaying care, and into new services, clinical standards and long-term monitoring for older people in line with the Aged Care Royal Commission's recommendations.
- Improving research translation and implementation through more efficient communication of outcomes and focused impact plans, which include dissemination of findings to all levels of practice and mandating end user engagement.
- Considering a new mechanisms-based preventive health program, focusing on the common underlying biology that underpins many chronic diseases and unhealthy ageing, and the environmental factors and drugs which modulate this biology. The Burden of Disease report indicates non-fatal conditions provide the greater part of our overall disease burden, with 38% associated with modifiable risk factors, among which obesity and smoking are the most important.

3. Suggest options for how the next Strategy could address these critical issues and factors?

The next Strategy could address these critical issues and factors impacting on the health system through better alignment with NHMRC priorities, notably in relation to basic research and translation pathways, as well as better alignment with state and national health priorities. Involving communities and end users in the consultation process would also be extremely beneficial. As the ultimate beneficiaries of health and medical research, consumer involvement from research inception through to practical implementation is key to improving successful translation into practice. The MRFF should strengthen its role in connecting all aspects of this journey. Stronger evaluation of funded projects will also help to improve transparency and accountability. Currently, funding is siloed into basic, clinical, population health or health services research. More funding proposals are required that span and integrate these disciplines.

4. Given the new and significant impact of COVID-19 on health services and health research, how should the new Strategy address COVID-19 related topics and impacts?

The interaction between chronic diseases and COVID-19 should be a key area of focus. The same biological, environmental and socioeconomic factors that underlie chronic diseases and unhealthy ageing also determine the risk of serious outcomes from COVID-19. This nexus needs to be prioritised.

In addition, the new Strategy should examine COVID-19 impact on:

- **Health information:** ways to improve availability and uptake, including preventative health to increase self-management and reliance on primary care.
- **Health service access:** how the impacts of delayed health checks and delayed elective surgery can be addressed and managed in future crises.
- **Health system impacts:** flow-on effects of increased burden on emergency and critical care and how to build flexibility into the system.
- **Social isolation and impact on health:** examine the effects of isolation on social gathering and practices of grieving and how health services can better support people living in isolation/experiencing grief to contribute to information for future pandemics.
- **Health workforce:** impact on health workers and how provision of services can be improved within the existing system.

PRIORITIES

1. Could the current Priorities be improved to better address the requirements under the MRFF Act? If so, how? *(This could include consideration of what elements of the Priorities work well to guide MRFF investments and what could be improved for research translation and impact?)*

The current priorities and funding criteria could be improved to reflect Australia's health burden and health care needs more accurately.

Prioritising research to better understand and treat the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences is essential. COVID-19 research and the wider impact on the health system and workforce should be addressed through allocated MRFF funding.

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the root causes of preventable diseases and unhealthy ageing. For example, the health burden of dementia and obesity is equitable to cancer, but these conditions have not benefited from nearly as much MRFF funding.

The impact of climate on health is currently absent from the priorities and is a critical area to address in the Asia Pacific region with implications for clean air/water and sanitation, health stress, infectious diseases, food production and malnutrition, and patterns of infection.

In addition, incentives to reward collaboration and maximise innovative research should be implemented, especially in relation to the MRFF Missions. Consumer-driven research is currently limited to disease groupings and consumer consultation and co-design are not mandated or measured.

2. What are the most critical current and future issues for the health system and the health and medical research sector that the next Priorities need to address through research translation/implementation?

The most important critical current and future issues for the health system and HMR sector are:

- The unsustainable rising burden of unhealthy ageing. Addressing this issue will require focusing attention and resources on common factors – biological, societal and environmental - and an integrated approach to discovery science, primary and secondary prevention, treatment, health systems research, and population health.
- Health inequality and lack of engagement with vulnerable and marginalised populations.
- Poor uptake of existing proven management especially in primary healthcare.
- Increasing demand and need for clinical standards in older persons' health.
- Limited uptake of prevention and health promotion programs.

3. Suggest options for how the next Priorities could address these critical issues?

The next Priorities could address these critical issues by:

- Removing the focus on individual diseases and addressing common causes and integrated solutions.
- Giving prominent status to research to better understand, develop new therapies and treat mental health concerns of Australians across their lifespan. This is a critical area for Australians in general - including Indigenous Australians - and is of particular concern in response to COVID-19.
- Capitalising on emerging technologies and driving the establishment of new technologies. This is an area that should be enthusiastically supported because such technologies will drive discoveries in all diseases.

- Addressing the security of career pathways for emerging medical research leaders and training a new generation that is able to work collaboratively across disciplines, is responsive to community needs and can communicate and translate their research into practice. Insecurity among the emerging workforce is both impeding Australia's progress in medical research and innovation and wasteful of human capital.

4. Given the new and significant impact of COVID-19 on health services and health research, how should the new priorities address COVID-19 related topics?

Although funding was allocated to COVID-19 related topics in 2020, the outcomes and impact have not been widely communicated in the medical research community. Future planning would benefit from a summary of successful projects and their impact in each of the six domains prior to new priorities being decided.

That said, COVID-19 has illustrated systemic challenges in health and medical funding, health systems and society, and seeking multidisciplinary solutions for these challenges should become a priority. For example, addressing the impact of COVID-19 on effective models of care, mental health, public health messaging, prevention, therapeutics and diagnostics.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on medical and public health research has not been addressed despite causing significant disruption. A Research Recovery Fund could assist current MRFF projects to recover from this disruption by fast-tracking existing projects.