

## **Australian Government protects medical research in May budget**

Eight weeks of overwhelming community opposition to planned government cuts to health and medical research have seen the Australian Government protect medical research funding in the 2011-12 budget.

Cabinet leaks in early March suggested that the government had planned to cut \$400 million over three years from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), which funds the bulk of Australia's medical research. However budget papers released tonight indicate the government has responded to public opinion, with federal funding for the NHMRC maintained at \$850 million.

Professor Doug Hilton, director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, said he was delighted to see that the government was committed to continued investment in medical research. "It is a relief to see the government recognises the importance of medical research for Australians and for the economy. Our scientists have worked long and hard to establish Australia's international reputation as a hub for biomedical research and the government, through its continued investment, has shown its support for this commitment," he said.

However, while medical research has been protected, other science initiatives have not been so lucky. The Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) program has been cut by \$33.4 million over four years, while the Collaborative Research Networks program has been cut by \$20.7 million in the final two years of forward estimates.

To coincide with the budget announcement, Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, The Honourable Mark Butler MP, has released a video announcing a strategic review of Australian federal medical research funding would be conducted in a bid to improve the system.

"I'm announcing that over the coming weeks I propose to consult closely with the sector about terms of reference for [the strategic] review, and about the sort of personnel we want overseeing the review as well. By the middle of the year, in June or July, we'll be in a position to announce those terms of reference and the panel we're appointing to oversee the review. Hopefully we'll have that review in place by the middle of next year. That broad strategic direction combined with your passion and your expertise I'm confident will mean that in the coming decades we'll get the same benefits in terms of the health of the Australian community that we came to expect over the past few decades," he said.

In his video, Mr Butler praised the medical research community for their passion and diligence, and thanked the campaign for raising the profile of medical research in the community. "Thanks very much again for your incredible work that you do, day in day out, as medical researchers, and thanks for the campaign that you've been a part of over the last few weeks to really raise the profile and importance of medical research in the broader community's mind."

Professor Hilton welcomed news of the review into medical research funding. "We look forward to working out with the government where the investment needs to be and where the efficiencies will be gained so that we have a really vibrant sector. There are a lot of important things to get right in the next decade – not only improving diagnosis, prevention and treatment of disease, but making sure those benefits can be rolled out to the whole community and not just parts of the community," Professor Hilton said.

Community support for medical research and the benefits it brings to human health have been evident in recent weeks with more than 12,000 Australians taking to the streets during April in Rallies for Research protesting planned cuts to medical research. The government has received hundreds of letters in favour of medical research and a petition carrying more than 12,000 signatures in support of research has been presented to Federal Member for Melbourne Adam Bandt for tabling in Parliament.

The research and general communities had expressed concern that cutting the medical research budget would delay or halt patient access to new treatments, diagnostics and preventive medicines for cancer, heart disease, diabetes and a myriad of other conditions that affect Australians.

"The huge positive to emerge from the campaign is that the government and the medical research sector have been reminded by the community that what we do – whether we are successful in our endeavours to prevent or cure disease or not – is important to the community," Professor Hilton said.

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