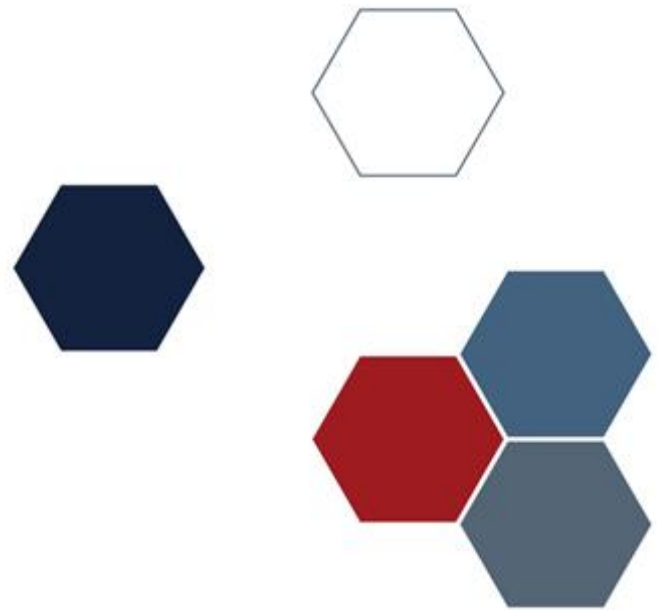




Australian Government



# Medical Research **Future Fund**

**Australian Medical Research and  
Innovation Strategy Roundtable**

**30 September 2021**

**Discussion Summary**

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## Introduction

The [Medical Research Future Fund Act 2015](#) (the MRFF Act) establishes the Australian Medical Research Advisory Board (AMRAB) to:

- determine a strategy for ensuring that a coherent and consistent approach is adopted in providing financial assistance for medical research and medical innovation through the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF)
- determine priorities (the Priorities) for providing financial assistance under the MRFF for medical research and medical innovation that are consistent with the Strategy that is in force
- provide a transparent process for consulting with experts in medical research and consumers before determining a Strategy or Priorities.

The inaugural Strategy covers the period 2016-2021 and a new Strategy is required to be tabled in Parliament on or before 8 November 2021.

The consultation process undertaken in determining the new Strategy and Priorities provides a platform to discuss:

- whether the Strategy and Priorities could be improved to better meet the requirements set out in the MRFF Act
- the current and future critical issues and factors a new Strategy and Priorities should address to guide MRFF investments in health and medical research
- options to address these critical issues and factors
- how the Strategies and Priorities can account for the significant impact of COVID-19 on health services and the research sector.

As part of the consultation process, AMRAB held an Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy Roundtable on 30 September 2021 that engaged with a range of stakeholders from across the medical research and medical innovation sector (see Attendees). This summary provides a high-level overview of discussions from the roundtable, by providing insight on how roundtable attendees view the overarching role of the MRFF within the broader health and medical research landscape, and to identify opportunities and challenges. These views will be used to complement the written submissions through an online consultation hub to inform AMRAB on developing the new Strategy and as part of refreshing the Priorities.

In providing a summary of the roundtable this document reflects the discussion, however does not represent the endorsed views of AMRAB or the Department of Health.

## Purpose

The purpose of the roundtable was to encourage discussion and reflection on shaping the MRFF's future strategic directions. Rather than focusing on individual specific priorities, the roundtable provided a dialogue platform to inform the shaping of the framework that will contextualise the MRFF within the health and medical research system, and the broader health, social and economic system, as well as how that framework will be used to identify suggested priority areas for funding. It was also an opportunity to reflect on the MRFF's current operating context, nationally and internationally, and the challenges and opportunities this creates, and propose ways forward.

## Attendees

Name	Representing Organisation
Professor Ian Frazer AC (Chair)	Australian Medical Research Advisory Board
Professor Caroline Homer AO (Deputy-Chair)	
Professor Denise Doolan	
Professor Tom Calma AO	
Mr Yasser El-Ansary	
Professor Douglas Hilton AO	
Professor Anne Kelso AO	
Ms Imelda Lynch	
<b>Invited organisations/groups</b>	
Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia	
Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes	
AusBiotech	
Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences	
Australian Research Council	
Australian Technology Network of Universities	
Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation	
Consumers Health Forum of Australia (3 representatives)	
Innovative Research Universities	
Lowitja Institute (2 representatives)	
Medical Services Advisory Committee	
Medical Technology Association of Australia	
National First Nations Research Network (2 representatives)	
National Health and Medical Research Council	
Health Chief Executives Forum delegation (2 representatives)	
Office of the Chief Scientist	
Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee	
Regional Universities Network	
Research Australia	
The Group of Eight	

## Discussion

To facilitate discussion, attendees were allocated to one of six breakout groups to enable more efficient discussion on three broad topics:

1. MRFF Role and Complementarity
2. Translating Research into Impact
3. Challenges and Opportunities

Attendees were asked to consider the following questions under each theme.

### **Theme 1: MRFF Role and Complementarity**

Consider the strategic place and role of the MRFF as part of a broader inter-connected system supporting medical research and medical innovation in Australia.

#### Considerations:

- The object of the MRFF is to 'improve the health and wellbeing of Australians.' The MRFF complements other Government, not for profit and industry support for research.
- What unique role/s can the MRFF play within this system?
- How could this role/ these roles be articulated in the 2021-26 Strategy?
- In 5 years' time, how will we know that the MRFF has fulfilled its unique role/s and made its most effective contribution within this interconnected system?

### **Theme 2: Translating Research into Impact**

Consider the role of the MRFF in supporting the translation of research into impact by generating new knowledge, supporting the adoption of evidence-based health interventions, and promoting the development and implementation of new interventions.

#### Considerations:

- The object of the MRFF is to 'improve the health and wellbeing of Australians.'
- The current Strategy has identified 5 impact measures for assessing the effectiveness of the MRFF; they focus on the translation of research to impact.
- What is the MRFF's unique role in supporting the translation of research into impact?
- How could this role be articulated in the 2021-26 Strategy?
- In five years' time, how will we know that the MRFF has been successful in translating research into impact?

### Theme 3: Challenges and Opportunities

Consider the MRFF's current operating context, nationally and internationally, and the challenges and opportunities this poses.

#### Considerations:

- The MRFF operates within the context of the health system as a contributor to the broader social and economic system.
- Health and medical research is an international endeavour, and Australian researchers are part a globally connected system.
- What are the key challenges (e.g. COVID-19) and opportunities for the MRFF within these interconnected systems, particularly for consumers and the community?
- How can these be articulated in the 2021-26 Strategy?

### Summary of discussion

Improve coordination so that the MRFF is better able to complement and leverage other partners within the broader health and medical research system, and across the research and translation pipeline

The MRFF's purpose is to support health and medical research and medical innovation, with a strong focus on translating research outcomes, in order to deliver health and economic benefits and improve the health and wellbeing of all Australians. The MRFF has a unique role as a funder of priority-led research thus complementing the NHMRC, which mainly funds investigator-led research.

The MRFF can adopt a stronger role in driving research coordination and alignment. As the MRFF continues to mature, there is an opportunity to better define the overarching role of the MRFF in complementing and enhancing support from other partners within the broader health and medical research system. To achieve the greatest impact from alignment, there should be coordination at the national level and across the whole spectrum of the research system, from the research discovery phase to translation of research outcomes to clinical and preventative practices. This includes an integrated and structured approach, such as through roundtables, to bring together, coordinate and collaborate with other partners within the research and commercialisation landscape, from the NHMRC, other Commonwealth and state/territory agencies, to industry partners, the private healthcare industry, and philanthropic groups etc., to enable and better leverage co-investments from partners.

To truly maximise the potential for translational research to impact on health outcomes there needs to be an improvement in developing and encouraging collaboration between researchers, health system users and beneficiaries of research outcomes, including investors, consumers, those involved in health service delivery (public and private) as well as industry. The MRFF has a role to play in supporting collaboration, with a particular focus on co-design and co-creation, from end-to-end of the research to translation pipeline. Co-design and co-creation present an important opportunity to think about the end-product or therapy and its users, and the degree to which a research outcome is of direct benefit to end-users and can be translated into new treatment options and health

interventions. This could also include early involvement of the relevant regulator(s) to ensure research design and generation of outputs meet the required regulatory requirements.

From a multisectoral perspective, stronger co-ordination and alignment across and between the public and private ecosystems is required, which may involve aligning jurisdictional policies and priorities, and closer involvement of state and territory agencies in the research co-design and co-funding opportunities. There also needs to be greater consideration of matters such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities, and the needs of individuals with a disability and those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. In the private sphere, engaging the commercialisation ecosystem is key. Greater alignment can be achieved through sponsored projects and incorporating measures that facilitate this alignment in proposals. The result of improved co-ordination will be technologies and interventions embedded into practice, adopted by the community and greater translational capability and capacity in the research community. Co-ordination will also reduce duplication and harness the benefits of scale.

Given the competitive environment of research and the ongoing need to build connections between and within institutions, it will be important for the MRFF to support collaboration between researchers, particularly from different disciplines, including potentially, outside of the health sector. The MRFF may need to explore how to further incentivise collaboration, focussing on a merit-based system that promotes national, multisectoral partnerships.

#### Improve health system efficiency and effectiveness for all

The use of MRFF funding to ensure greatest value to the Australian public is crucial given the ongoing significant health expenditures by the community through government. It is vital to ensure sustainability by improving health system efficiency and effectiveness. This includes research that drives more efficiencies in the health system, meets the needs of diverse groups and addresses inequalities and gaps (such as those relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability and other priority populations). It also requires that all Australians can access the best available healthcare and benefit from better health outcomes, irrespective of their circumstances. This could involve incentivising partnerships with industry, state and territory governments and others to support research into rare health and medical conditions that otherwise may not be seen as commercially viable by industry or supporting research into the problems of rural health care delivery or into improved management of common chronic conditions.

Consideration should also include how the system can better embed strategies for ensuring that design of research supports research translation and delivery of practical health outcomes and is fit-for-purpose to address specific needs. For example, support could be provided for engaging with and incentivising equitable participation across populations in research and clinical trials.

The MRFF should also strengthen its role in connecting the journey from research inception to the practical implementation of benefits for the end-user. Consumer involvement is a major key to this. Consumers are the ultimate users and beneficiaries of health and medical research. To improve the success of translation into practice, consumers should be involved in all aspects of research and this

can be achieved through research teams effectively partnering with consumers at all stages of design through to implementation and impact.

#### Design initiatives so impact is measured and look for opportunities to adopt a broader ecological approach

The MRFF's potential impacts on health and the economy have not yet been realised. Evaluation of impact will be key to determining the success of the MRFF, and clear measurable indicators, including interim lead and lag indicators, should be built into implementation strategies for MRFF funding initiatives. This should include measures to inform the review of the Priorities. An important challenge for the MRFF going forward will be knowing if it has made an impact on the translation of research into clinical practice.

The MRFF is unique in that it offers a mechanism that can provide a bridge across many different components of the research ecosystem. For example, it can be seen as creating a bridge between capacity building and research, between translation and commercialisation, between prevention and care, treatment or cure, and between the Commonwealth and other jurisdictions. Considering these multiple facets of MRFF operation, particular emphasis needs to be placed on clearly defining impact and also on ensuring that the right people are involved in research to optimise the likelihood of impact.

To better realise impact, an ecological and multisectoral approach should be adopted to address broader social issues. Wider engagement needs to address inequities in the health system to maximise the impact of research on the health and wellbeing of all Australians.

Adopting an ecological lens considers environmental and social contexts of issues and not just the biomedical. Impact goes beyond people's health as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed how we live and work, and how we view the future of our society. Delivering better health is integral to every part of society. Broader flow-on impacts, such as on food security and the environment, should be considered when designing impact measures.

#### Build, support and grow the workforce

A strong and thriving health and medical research system is dependent on having a suitably skilled workforce, that can be sustained across the whole spectrum of the system. This includes specialised skills from one end of the research pipeline to the other; from those required for research discoveries to research translation and commercialisation.

There is a need to enhance support for early- to mid-career researchers within the health and medical research system, and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic due to a combination of an inability to retain local talent and to bring in new overseas talent. Ensuring there is a healthy talent pool of early- to mid-career researchers is vital for ensuring succession planning and the long-term future sustainability and capability of the research sector. In addition, there is also a need for greater consideration of promoting gender equity in the research workforce. Difficulty in retaining women in the science and research workforce especially has been a long-standing challenge. These are important considerations for the entire research ecosystem.



### Strengthen international collaboration and global impact

Australian health and medical research is recognised as world-class. There is opportunity for the sector to identify where Australia can best contribute its expertise towards global health impacts, by engaging with international partners and especially regional neighbours to understand and address common health priorities. As evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat from infectious diseases and globalisation does not recognise international borders. Biosecurity and improving the overall health status within the region are of national interests to Australia, which also contribute to global health.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has also hampered participation in international research, from building knowledge and capability, through collaborations, to access to international funding, with potential long-term impact. There is an opportunity for the MRFF to work in partnership with the NHMRC to ensure that the sector can work strategically to continue to maintain and grow its international standing and participation.

### Consider emerging health issues and long-term future health impact

There is an opportunity for the MRFF to consider future long-term health needs. For example, recent extreme climate challenges (e.g. bush fires) as well as the COVID-19 pandemic are recognised to have longer-term direct and indirect health impacts (including on mental health) that will need to be addressed.

There should also be an emphasis on health prevention and ways to assess and reduce ineffective and/or harmful health interventions and minimise waste in the health system. There is also an opportunity to consider how other parts of the broader health and medical research system could have a positive impact on the healthcare system that are not usually funded by traditional methods.

### Invest in high-risk, high-return research

The MRFF has an opportunity to focus more on high-risk research and innovation that has potential for high returns. This especially applies to novel or emerging technologies, which have potential to significantly transform the sector and produce health and economic benefits, but often have long lead research and development time requiring significant investments with a high risk of failure rate. This can be facilitated by looking towards under-valued areas that require further research. This could include strengthening the research pipeline by focussing on research with high potential knowledge impact but with no direct or immediate commercial applications.