

Submission to the Medical Research Future Fund consultation to inform the second Australian Medical Research and Innovation Priorities 2018 – 2020

The consultation provided five guiding questions to be considered for submissions. The EMCR Forum Executive chose to answer questions four and 5.

4. How can current research capacity, production and use within the health system be further strengthened through the MRFF? (500 words)

The Early- and Mid-Career Researchers (EMCR) Forum believes the MRFF needs to give greater support to EMCRs (defined as up to 15 years post-PhD, excluding career interruptions) to develop research capacity and support research excellence amongst EMCRs.

Recent reductions in fellowship funding rates have hit EMCRs hard. Fellowship funding success for EMCRs have been well below 20% over the past three years, an outcome which is discouraging for many EMCRs.

The EMCR Forum continues to be concerned that many talented young scientists are leaving research because of inadequate research funding, career instability as a result of contract-based work, and lack of clear career pathways and progression. As such, Australia is facing a declining pool of talented young researchers as EMCRs leave the sector or choose to work overseas.

The MRFF has funded Practitioner and Translating Research into Practice (TRIP) Fellowships that supported early career health researchers and practitioners. The EMCR Forum believes it is imperative to support EMCRs through such fellowships if we are to build research capacity, nurture the next generation of research leaders and develop a critical mass of research expertise in Australia. To this end, the EMCR Forum proposes MRFF funding be used strategically to encourage the retention of exceptional EMCRs working in fundamental and translational health and medical research, through the provision of fellowships such as these.

The MRFF should ensure the next generation of research leaders are supported and nurtured by mandating MRFF-funded projects include EMCRs in their project plans. Project plans should provide a robust framework for the mentoring and career progression for EMCRs during conduct of the project.

Innovation arises from research groups that are diverse and include scientists from a range of backgrounds; they produce more impactful results. Selection criteria for MRFF projects need to take into account diversity, so projects benefit by tapping into the talents and creativity of the diversity in our research environment.

The EMCR Forum encourages the MRFF to consider potential biases in current application processes. An example is provided in the recent release of the guidelines for the upcoming 2019 NHMRC Investigator Grants, where applications will open just before school holidays and close

just after schools reopen. This timeframe would not allow for full participation of many researchers who have parental obligations, especially women.

The EMCR Forum suggests that the MRFF sets realistic timeframes on applications to ensure that the MRFF supports the best researchers and research teams through its fellowships and projects.

5. Additional comments (250 words)

The EMCR Forum holds strongly that a researcher's time is best spent on conducting impactful research. Many grant applications are extensive and the administrative burden on researchers takes away time and resources that would be spent on innovative research.

The EMCR Forum recommends the MRFF application processes incorporate a two-stage process whereby prospective applicant(s) submit a brief expression of interest based on key criteria and only complete a full application if selected to progress to the next stage. An extended turnaround time between the release date of the funding call and lodgement of submissions will also support EMCRs submitting higher quality applications.

The EMCR Forum encourages collection of a variety of demographic data to enable assessment of diversity in funded projects.

MRFF projects should enable collaboration and cross-sector mobility between academe, government and industry. Projects can support the career development of EMCRs by enabling researchers to hold joint appointments or collaborate with government or industry partners.

The EMCR Forum would welcome the opportunity to engage further with the MRFF. We look forward to working with the MRFF to help meet its objectives in achieving improved health outcomes for Australians by supporting research excellence, while building capacity and leadership within the health and medical research sector.