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The Group of Eight (Go8) submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Medical Research Future Fund Bill 2015 and the Medical Research Future Fund (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2015.

The Go8 is pleased to provide comment on the Medical Research Future Fund Bill 2015 and the Medical Research Future Fund (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2015. Please note that this submission represents the views of the Go8 network; member universities may also make their own, more detailed submissions.

The Go8 is a network of Australia's leading research-intensive universities. Importantly it is at the forefront of Australia's medical research.

- In 2013, the most recent year for which data is available, Go8 universities comprised seven of the top 15 Grant Administering Institutions awarded funding by the NHMRC;¹
- All Go8 institutions received a rating of 4 (above world standard) or 5 (well above world standard) in health and medical research in the most recent round of ERA;
- Go8 universities continue to deliver globally recognised medical discoveries such as Elastagen (synthetic skin for the treatment of burns and chronic wounds), RecaldentTM (enabling the care of early tooth decay) and Ferriscan[®] (a MRI-based technology that measures the concentration of iron in the liver, eliminating the need for a painful biopsy);
- Go8 universities educate around a quarter of students studying in the field of Health, and they enrolled 84% of the Higher Degree Research load in Medical Studies in 2012.² As such, the Go8 is strongly positioned to provide comment on how best to capitalise on this Fund.

The Go8 therefore welcomes the commitment and opportunities provided by the establishment of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF). The creation of this fund in a time of fiscal restraint is appreciated by the Go8.

It represents a significant investment in Australia's future. This makes it critically important to ensure that the legislation governing its administration and distribution allows for the maximum possible impact and return on investment.

To this end it is crucial that the Fund is managed in accordance with the following high level principles:

¹ https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files/nhmrc/publications/attachments/nh167_funding_facts_book_2013.pdf

² Department of Education Higher Education Statistics Collection, 2013, All Students. HDR load figure obtained through special data request, Department of Education.



1. Independent Expert Review and Advice:

The Go8 urges the Senate to include the need for independent expert review or advice as part of the process of distributing funds from the MRFF.

Independent expert review represents international best practice in the allocation of scarce funding, and should be included in the selection and allocation of project funding from the MRFF.

Independent expert advice should be sought in other instances.

Such advice assists greatly to ensure effective and transparent mechanisms to target funding to the teams which are best placed and most capable of providing Australia with the highest quality research outcomes.

As noted by the Global Research Council *Statement of Principles for Scientific Merit Review*:

Rigorous and transparent scientific merit review helps to assure that government funding is appropriately expended on the most worthy projects to advance the progress of science and address societal challenges.³

2. The Medical Research Advisory Board

The Go8 notes that the *Consequential Amendments Bill* includes the creation of an Australian Medical Research Advisory Board, which: “consists of the CEO of the NHMRC and other persons appointed by the Health Minister with suitable experience and knowledge”.⁴ The Go8 supports the inclusion of the head of the NHMRC and urges the Senate to also include independent experts, either as Board members or as a source of independent expert review or advice for the Board, sourced from appropriate bodies, such as the newly formed Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences.

3. Definition of ‘Medical Research’:

The Medical Research Future Fund Bill (2015) currently lists the following definition:

medical research includes research into health.⁵

The Go8 urges the Senate to ensure an effective definition of medical research. We do not believe the above definition meets this requirement. As it stands this is a concerning omission.

³ http://www.globalresearchcouncil.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/gc_principles-English.pdf

⁴ http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/amend/r5397_amend_23625cbc-3e46-43b5-a8de-a9f0a7765e75/upload_pdf/HK145.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

⁵ *Medical Research Future Fund Bill 2015*, p.6



The Go8 advises extreme caution in limiting research funded through the MRFF to medicine or 'health' fields. To do so is likely to hinder Australia's capacity to produce truly outstanding advances in health and medicine.

Major advances in health and medicine often rely on basic research conducted in non-medical related disciplines, such as:

- information technology (computer modelling to understand how molecules function in the body);
- physics, engineering and mathematics (the development of technology such Magnetic Resonance Imaging);
- chemistry (development of new drugs).⁶

These areas must not be denied access to MRFF funding. There is a need to ensure that 'medical' research is defined in such a way that it enables the fund to support the full range of disciplinary, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research that has the potential to produce new and improve existing interventions and services which lead to better health.

Too narrow a definition will be detrimental to the very outcomes the MRFF is being set up to deliver. The MRFF must not be prevented by a narrow definition from making a significant impact on health and medical outcomes.

It is indeed a question of balance – because too broad a definition could dissipate effort and decrease the effectiveness of the additional funding the MRFF can provide.

Getting the definition right is key. It does concern the Go8 that while the legislation addresses the need to fund innovation activities, it does not contain an explicit definition of medical research.

As noted above, the definition section of the Bill states only that '*medical research includes research into health*'. This means that it provides no specific guidance about the range of research disciplines and approaches that the Fund can support.

Limiting the research funded through the MRFF to medicine or health related fields is likely to hinder Australia's capacity to produce truly outstanding advances in health and wellbeing.

By contrast, the legislation does make it clear that the MRFF will be able to support activities that go beyond research and in particular it will assist those activities that underlie the implementation and use of research findings, including those uses which require commercialisation. For example, the Explanatory Memorandum for the Bill notes that:

The Medical Research Future Fund is a dedicated investment vehicle to provide a secure revenue stream to be used for medical research and medical innovation

⁶ See the Group of Eight submission to the *Review to Strengthen Independent Medical Research Institutes*, November 2014



and that the monies within the fund can be used to make:

- ... grants of financial assistance to medical research institutes, non-profit organisations, universities and corporations;
- ... payments to the States and Territories for expenditure on medical research and medical innovation – including application and commercialisation activity that translates discoveries to new treatments and practice;
- ... [payments to] corporate Commonwealth entities outside the General Government Sector (for example, CSIRO).⁷

The supplementary explanatory memorandum states:

*The MRFF will give particular impetus to the translation of medical research into health and economic benefits.*⁸

In his second reading speech, Federal Treasurer Joe Hockey said that the MRFF:

*... will support investment across the research spectrum, from laboratory research, through clinical trials, the commercialisation of new drugs or devices, and the translation of new techniques or protocols into clinical practice and public health.*⁹

That is all very well and indeed a worthy determination but it does leave the glaring omission of what is ‘medical research’. The Go8 contends that this is fundamental.

Furthermore, much medical research is interdisciplinary, drawing on a diverse array of research processes, disciplinary knowledge and technical support to provide integrated and workable solutions that is possible to apply within today’s often complex health systems.

Because research is advancing so rapidly, the options and connections that lead to the most significant advances are themselves changing and unpredictable.

For this reason the best definition will be one that provides a clear indication of the outcome the research should achieve, but which is open as the research necessary to achieve it.

⁷ http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/ems/r5397_ems_0ed64332-f430-4688-97f9-317eeb8fafbc/upload_pdf/500706.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22legislation/ems/r5397_ems_0ed64332-f430-4688-97f9-317eeb8fafbc%22

⁸ http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/ems/r5397_ems_677f85cd-8688-40e4-ae45-1384d9ac1fa6/upload_pdf/503014.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22legislation/ems/r5397_ems_677f85cd-8688-40e4-ae45-1384d9ac1fa6%22

⁹ <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=CHAMBER;id=chamber%2Fhansard%2F2f554bb1-776c-4c6f-b693-214bf49ecaa3%2F0005;query=id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F2f554bb1-776c-4c6f-b693-214bf49ecaa3%2F0004%22>



The Go8's support for the MRFF is absolute. Its determination that the MRFF's construct must work is equally so. To that end the Go8 would be pleased to work with the Government, Australian Medical Research Advisory Board or other appropriate organisation(s) to develop a definition for 'medical research' which can meet these needs.