



# **The Coalition's Policy** to Protect and Streamline Health and Medical Research Funding

August 2013

## Introduction

The Coalition will protect the future funding of health and medical research in Australia, provide additional targeted investments in dementia and tropical health research, and simplify and streamline the medical research grant making process.

Despite the dramatic deterioration in the country's finances, the Coalition believes that sustained investment in this sector is essential if we are to retain our scientific talent, generate new health discoveries and fully reap the benefits of health and medical research in this country.

We understand that our medical research community needs certainty and security when it comes to future funding.

Only a Coalition government will ensure that funding of the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) medical research is safeguarded – and we have the track record to prove it.

The Coalition remains committed to providing targeted investments to help meet growing challenges. Accordingly, a Coalition government will provide an additional investment of \$200 million over five years for dementia research.

A Coalition government will also invest \$42 million to support the expansion of the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine at James Cook University.

We will enhance our commitments by simplifying and streamlining NHMRC grant processes and by providing national consistency for clinical research trials as recommended by the *McKeon Review* into medical research. This important Review will continue to inform our future policies on health and medical research.



## Background

We recognise that funding for medical research is one of the best long-term investments a government can make for the health of the Australian people. Consistent long-term funding for medical research lifts national productivity, improves quality of life and boosts life expectancy.

Australia is a recognised world leader in medical research. We are among the top five countries in the world in scientific articles per capita – well ahead of both the United States and the United Kingdom. In the past decade alone, Australia's health and medical research sector has produced three Nobel Prize winners. We are the home of some of the world's greatest medical discoveries ranging from penicillin and the cervical cancer drug, Gardasil, to the bionic ear and in-vitro fertilisation.

The Coalition is proud of its record supporting Australia's medical research community. The last Coalition Government increased funding to the NHMRC five-fold from \$131 million in 1995-96 to \$715 million in 2010-11 after all our funding commitments had been implemented.

As Health Minister, Tony Abbott announced an additional \$905 million for Australian health and research in 2006 and in 2007 he provided \$485 million in infrastructure grants to a wide range of medical research institutes.

The previous Coalition Government made funding of health and medical research – and building the infrastructure capacity to support it – a priority. We recognised then, as now, that health and medical research is essential to Australia's ability to deliver high quality health care into the future.

Breakthroughs in health and medical research may come at any time, but they do not come cheaply and can take years to develop. While Labor's record deficits and budget blowouts have created a 'Budget Emergency,' the Coalition recognises that the funding of medical research needs to be consistent and ongoing to ensure Australia does not undermine its capabilities in this field.



# The Plan

The Coalition will protect existing NHMRC funding over the forward estimates.

In addition, a Coalition government will provide a targeted investment to help tackle dementia. Dementia is now the third leading cause of death in Australia and no cure exists. Already, over 320,000 Australians live with the disease, including one in four people over the age of 85. The Coalition will provide an additional \$200 million exclusively for dementia research.

The Coalition also stands ready to confront major tropical health security risks and establish Northern Australia as a centre of excellence in tropical health, medical and biotechnology research and research training. A Coalition government will also invest \$42 million for the Australian Institute of Tropical Health and Medicine.

We will enhance our commitment to medical research through a number of other measures to bolster the health and medical sector. We will do this by drawing upon some key recommendations of the *Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research*, known as the *McKeon Review*. This is only the start, as the *McKeon Review* will continue to inform the future of the Coalition's policy direction on medical research reform. As well as our commitment to protect funding, we will:

1. move swiftly towards a nationally consistent approach to the way clinical research trials are overseen and conducted, and;
2. streamline the NHMRC's grant application process and simplify its grant assessment process so that researchers can spend more time in the lab, clinic or health service and less time completing paperwork.

## Streamline and simplify grant applications and approvals

The *McKeon Review* found that NHMRC grant applications are complex and time consuming for researchers. Researchers spend significant time negotiating the complex bureaucratic process of grant funding. In fact, up to a quarter of a researcher's time is estimated to be spent applying for and reviewing grants.

This is not the most productive use of our best and brightest minds.

Our researchers want to be in the clinic and the lab working for the betterment of patients and the health system, not trawling through mountains of unnecessary paperwork.



Accordingly, the Coalition will work with the NHMRC and the health and medical research sector to:

1. streamline the NHMRC's grant application process, including simplifying the grant applications themselves, rationalising the different funding schemes and better integrating the process with that used by the Australian Research Council. This will assist both applicants and reviewers who commonly have to use both systems.
2. simplify the NHMRC's grant assessment process by what the *McKeon Review* calls an 'early triage' of those grant applications unlikely to be successful. This will reduce the increasing load on everyone involved in the grant reviewing process and thereby hasten approvals.
3. transition to five year grants to allow for greater career certainty and to recognise that high quality research is becoming increasingly complex to perform. The shortened timeframe of the typical three year project grants currently being awarded has led to persistent career insecurity, reduced quality and a constant administrative burden.

### Streamlining clinical research trials

Clinical trials are research projects in which a particular drug, medicine or device is tested on patients. They are a fundamental part of the medical research sector, attracting significant funding to it and providing a range of employment opportunities and livelihoods to our best scientists, their students and support staff. Most importantly, clinical trials are effectively the source for the new drugs and treatments Australians need in the future. Clinical trials done here mean that Australian patients get access faster.

However, while the enormous benefits of such trials are broadly accepted across our health system and throughout the economy, the number of new clinical trials has fallen by over 25 per cent since 2007. This is bad news for patients, our health system, researchers and industry. Furthermore, as the Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes makes clear, the global competition for clinical trials is growing rapidly and we risk losing our competitive edge because of rising costs and a slow approval process. These high costs and delays are particularly prevalent in human research ethics reviews that form part of these trials.

Unfortunately, the Labor Government has continued to drag its feet on this issue. A Clinical Trial Action Group was established in 2009 and reported in 2011. Despite a belated response earlier this year, the Government has yet to deliver any of the substantive reform that the sector so urgently seeks.



The Coalition will accelerate this much needed reform to clinical trials by working with the sector to nationally coordinate policies associated with clinical trials. We will develop a nationally consistent approach to ethical standards to reduce complexity, speed up the process and where possible, rationalise the number of ethics committees to reduce the large number that currently exist.

## The Choice

Our plan to protect medical research funding and provide additional targeted investments in areas such as dementia and tropical health research contrasts with Labor's recent attempt to actually cut funding to the NHMRC.

In March 2011, there were reports that the then Gillard Government was proposing to slash \$400 million from the NHMRC's budget over three years. This triggered a storm of protest with 7,000 medical researchers and staff participating in public demonstrations around the country and the Public Health Association of Australia issuing a letter signed by more than 150 public health professors urging Labor to abandon the proposed cuts.

After weeks of uncertainty, the Labor Government backed down and the proposed cuts did not proceed.

In contrast, Australians can trust the Coalition to protect medical research funding as we have a clear record that demonstrates our support for this critical sector. When we were last in government, the Coalition increased funding to the NHMRC five-fold from \$131 million in 1995-96 to \$715 million in 2010-11 after our funding commitments had been implemented.

In 2006, Tony Abbott, then the Health Minister, provided an additional \$905 million to Australian medical research. Furthermore, in 2007 he provided \$485 million in infrastructure grants to 14 of our nation's finest medical research facilities.



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