



4 July 2024

Mr Chris Tallentire MLA  
Chair  
Education and Health Standing Committee  
Parliament of Western Australia

[Via online submission](#)

Dear Mr Tallentire,

### **Inquiry into support for health and medical research funding and priorities**

The Western Australia Faculty of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP WA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into support for health and medical research funding and priorities.

The RACGP is Australia's largest professional general practice organisation, representing over 40,000 members working in or toward a career in general practice. RACGP WA is the local voice for RACGP members and the profession in Western Australia.

RACGP WA recommends that a portion of funds from the Future Health Research and Innovation Fund be set aside to support general practice research.

### **General comments**

General practitioners (GPs) are the first point of contact for most Australians seeking healthcare, with almost nine in 10 Australians visiting a GP at least once each year.<sup>1</sup> However, funding, infrastructure and capacity for research nationally has progressively moved away from general practice and primary care.

General practice research creates the evidence that informs best practice care, health service policy and planning, and education. Without appropriate research and data, the success of public health reforms cannot be monitored or guide policy modifications. Prioritising and investing in general practice research is essential for evidence-based reforms and a resilient healthcare system.

There is currently a mismatch between where research is conducted and where most Australians access healthcare. GP-led research, conducted in general practices, ensures issues specific to the general practice environment and patient population are addressed. Patients in general practice have more complex needs than those included in interventional, disease-specific studies. Many important research questions are unique to the general practice environment, where patients present with early and/or undifferentiated disease and multiple co-morbidities. These patients tend to be excluded from other research.



## Key topics for consideration as outlined in the terms of reference

### 1. Western Australia's small share of national competitive funding

Nationally competitive funding bodies such as the National Health and Medical Research Council and Medical Research Futures Fund allocate less than 1% of funding to general practice research projects nationally. As a result, GP researchers in WA are competing for what is already very limited funding.

GP researchers face unique challenges and lack the support that clinician researchers based in hospitals receive through their employment. Developing and investing in a career structure for academic general practitioners could increase the ability of locally based GP researchers to secure nationally competitive funding. Such a program would include specific funding to support the pipeline of GP researchers and strengthen general practice research capacity, for example through scholarships, fellowships and funding of infrastructure such as practice-based research networks. More information on infrastructure is provided below.

### 2. How the state's health and medical research priorities are determined

Health and medical research priorities should reflect the fact that the majority of healthcare takes place in the primary care system.<sup>2</sup> In determining the state's health and medical research priorities, the entirety of the health system needs to be considered and consulted. The [WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023–2033](#) acknowledges in the Minister's foreword that "*Disease prevention through research can reduce the financial burden on the primary care system and our hospitals – and makes for healthier Western Australians*". However, no general practice or primary care organisations were consulted in the development of the Strategy.

General practice research should be included in health and medical research strategies and grant funding programs. GPs must be included in co-design of all state-based strategies and projects involving general practice to ensure the outcomes are fit for purpose. GP involvement in relevant committees will ensure that research in general practice, and data access and usage, is planned in a manner mindful of the unique challenges associated with the general practice environment, and outcomes are relevant to patients and applicable to the general practice context.

### 3. The impact on specific types of research and areas of need.

#### General practice research

As the bulk of health care occurs in the community, general practice research can have significant leverage, and develop high quality, evidence based health care that translates into services that support patients directly and contributes to a more affordable health care system.

GP academics are vital to primary care research as leaders in the primary health care team who are uniquely positioned to understand the distinct characteristics of the general practice business model set in the complexities of primary care.

Building general practice research also plays an important role in addressing the GP workforce shortage. A strong GP academic workforce and research culture will have a direct impact on the number of medical students choosing general practice. The GP academic workforce is vital to sustain general practice in medical schools, where GP academics are needed to lead and contribute to teaching and inspire the next generation of medical students to a career in general practice. Research has indicated that there is a perception by medical students and junior doctors that general practice is not evidence based and does not present opportunities for research.<sup>3</sup> Building the research culture and profile within general practice will directly combat this perception.



## Research infrastructure and general practice-based research networks

There is an opportunity for Western Australia to become a national leader in supporting GP research by investing in the infrastructure that would enable it.

The Research Infrastructure Support program and the FHRI Fund Enabling Scheme do not meet the needs of general practice research infrastructure.

Infrastructure support for GP research does not consist of equipment and laboratories. The 'laboratories' for rigorous high quality GP research are GP-based research networks, which bring practices together to generate and address important research questions relevant to the local community and context. These networks provide the infrastructure that can address important policy and research questions such as evaluating new models of care in general practice, coordination of services between primary and tertiary care, and randomised controlled trials. Infrastructure support might include funding for research coordinators, protected research time for GPs, or compensation to practices for the time involved in participating in research.

The WA General Practice Based Research Network Group (WAGPBRN) is a recently established collaboration between The University of Notre Dame, The University of Western Australia, Curtin University and the Rural Clinical School which currently operates on limited funding. With infrastructure funding to support the operation of such a network, they would have the ability to conduct trials and other studies across the network, and become more competitive for federal medical research funding opportunities as the infrastructure to roll out trials will already be established.

In conclusion, a strategic investment in general practice research will reduce hospitalisation rates, enhance preventive care and management of acute and chronic disease, and deliver positive patient outcomes for a healthier Western Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission. If you have any questions or comments regarding this submission, please contact Mr Hamish Milne, WA Faculty & GP Training Operations Manager on

██████████ or ██████████.

Yours sincerely

██████████

Dr Ramya Raman  
Chair, RACGP WA

---

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. General Practice Health of the Nation 2023. East Melbourne: RACGP, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/primary-health-care/medicare-subsidised-care-2022-23/contents/gp-attendances>

<sup>3</sup> Wass VJ, Gregory S, Petty-Saphon K. By choice—not by chance: supporting medical students towards future careers in general practice. NHS Health Education England, Medical Schools Council. 2016.

[www.medschools.ac.uk/media/2881/by-choice-not-by-chance.pdf](http://www.medschools.ac.uk/media/2881/by-choice-not-by-chance.pdf)