



Education and Health Standing Committee

Inquiry into support for health and medical research funding and priorities

WA Health submission

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

Western Australia (WA) has a long history of excellence in health and medical research. The state is home to some of the world's leading researchers including Professor Fiona Stanley, Professor Fiona Wood and the Nobel prize winning Professor Barry Marshall. Given our small population size relative to other states, researchers and innovators work collaboratively, engage with consumers in the design and conduct of their work and translate findings into practice. Over the last 10 years our share of national competitive research funding, relative to our population size, has decreased, however strategies to address this decline have begun in earnest.

Since 2022 a renewed and increased focus on health and medical research and innovation began, following the appointment of the Honourable Stephen Dawson, MLC to the portfolio of Medical Research. Under Minister Dawson's leadership, the health and medical research and innovation sectors in WA are connected, engaged and supported.

In recognition of the renewed Ministerial focus, the Department of Health has also embarked on a range of strategic initiatives designed to raise the profile of health and medical research in WA and improve our overall national grant funding competitiveness.

To facilitate this strategic approach, the Office of Medical Research and Innovation (OMRI) was created in 2022 and is under the leadership of the Deputy Director General of the Department of Health. With over 40 staff and a range of portfolios, OMRI now provides sector-wide leadership for research and innovation in WA. This leadership will expand over the coming months to include improved sector-wide communication designed to collectively position WA as a leader in health and medical research in Australia, the recent appointment of a Communications and Stakeholder Engagement professional within OMRI will assist immensely.

As well as providing leadership across the research sector, the Department of Health works closely with other government agencies to advance health and medical research and innovation in the state. In particular, the Department of Health works closely with the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation to oversee the implementation of the WA Health and Medical Life Sciences Industry Strategy (HMLSIS). The joined-up approach to implementation of the HMLSIS provides a strategic focus on removing barriers to innovation and supporting the growth of local businesses evolving through high quality research and innovation, which facilitates

diversification of the state's economy, creating jobs and retaining a highly skilled workforce in WA.

Strategic initiatives to raise the profile of health and medical research and improve overall national grant funding competitiveness

Through the Department of Health's increasing engagement with the sector, there are a range of strategic initiatives being driven by OMRI which are focussed on identifying barriers to high quality research and exploring mechanisms to address these. While not an exhaustive list, the strategic priorities highlighted below will significantly improve the health and medical research ecosystem which will in turn provide a fertile research environment thereby increasing WA's competitiveness on a national and international stage.

Funding

- The Future Health Research and Innovation (FHRI) Fund was established in the 2020/21 financial year. It provides a secure source of funding to drive health and medical research, innovation, and commercialisation and through these activities improve the health and prosperity of all Western Australians.
- Establishing the FHRI Fund involved three areas of work: developing and implementing legislation; designing an appropriate governance structure; and consulting with stakeholders to inform the Strategy and Priorities for the application of FHRI Fund investment income.
- The FHRI Fund scheme is backed by the State's sovereign wealth fund. The capital of the fund will be preserved in perpetuity and only the annual investment income will be accessed. The capital balance of the FHRI Fund will continue to build through annual credits of one per cent of the State's royalty income.
- Since the Fund was established in 2020, approximately \$173 million in grants have been awarded to date to 598 recipients to support health and medical research and innovation in WA.
- Over the next four years a further \$247 million is available to continue funding more programs and initiatives.

State Strategy

- The WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023–2033 (the Strategy) outlines the priorities and direction of health and medical research for the state.
- The Strategy leverages the distinct advantages and opportunities of WA's unique geography and population to strengthen research capability across the sector.
- Extensive consultation undertaken in 2022 informed the development of the Strategy.
 - A comprehensive environmental scan of the research ecosystem included local, national and international health and medical research strategies and plans, to better understand key themes and opportunities.
 - This was complemented by focused engagement with WA stakeholders, where 91 people representing 48 different organisations across the research sector attended a workshop or submitted feedback.
 - To ensure the Strategy's alignment with the evidence, the themes arising from the stakeholder consultation and the desktop review were mapped to the final strategy to demonstrate the evidence-informed nature of the Strategy.

- The Strategy was launched by the Minister for Medical Research in February 2023, with more than 250 sector representatives in attendance.
- The vision for the Strategy is a collaborative consumer-driven ecosystem conducting world-leading impactful research that is translated into practice for healthier communities. It also provides a foundation for WA to create a vibrant and interconnected research sector.
- Five strategic goals support the vision:
 1. Build and empower workforce
 2. Grow partnerships
 3. Leverage the ecosystem
 4. Promote research
 5. Sustainable and diversified funding.
- Each of the strategic goals are complemented by more detailed strategic objectives which give further focus to each goal.
- There are 6 strategic focus areas for the strategy including:
 1. Aboriginal Health
 2. Consumer Engagement
 3. Precision Health
 4. Regional and Remote
 5. Digital Health
 6. Prevention.
- One of the Department's key mechanisms for implementing the strategy is building effective partnerships across the entire health and medical research ecosystem. In December 2023, the Minister for Medical Research led the first industry roundtable with leaders across WA's thriving philanthropic sector to discuss how philanthropy and the WA government can work together to fund research that will continue to drive better health outcomes for Western Australians. Other roundtables and targeted meetings are now occurring on a regular basis with funders and charities in WA to further identify opportunities for collaboration, and co-funding.

Ethics and Governance reform

- All research involving humans must be reviewed and approved by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). In the WA health system, there are currently 8 different HRECs, each conducting reviews in accordance with the national standards, but each introducing variation in quality and timeliness of review, creating frustration across the research ecosystem.
- During 2024, OMRI is transitioning each of these HRECs into a centralised office to be established within OMRI who will provide the secretariat and ethical review of all research conducted in the WA health system. This reform will improve timeliness of review, introduce consistency for researchers and make it simpler to encourage multi-site research in WA.
- Simultaneously, a review of research governance processes is underway to identify and establish consistent site-based approvals which will further streamline and simplify approvals processes.

Intellectual Property Policy review

- In 2023 the WA Government introduced a new state Intellectual Property (IP) Policy, which requires each government agency to develop and implement its own organisational policy. OMRI are working to revise the WA health system mandatory IP policy as well as consulting with all Health Service Providers (HSPs) to determine the supports required within the health system for identifying and managing IP created through research and innovation.
- The revised policy and support documents will help demystify IP, encourage HSPs to discuss IP with their employees and commercialise research findings that can benefit Western Australians accessing the WA public health system.

Statewide Biobank

- A key facilitator of health and medical research is the ready access to biomedical data and samples. OMRI are commencing sector-wide consultation to develop a model for a state-wide biobank, leveraging the state's premier longitudinal cohort studies and linked data assets to build a biobank that can be open to researchers all over the world. This is a unique opportunity to position WA as a leader in biobanking and will commence consultation in 2024.

Clinical Trials Frameworks

- A key component of a thriving health and medical research ecosystem is a range of diverse, high quality clinical trials. As WA has a low number of registered clinical trials, OMRI has commenced a program of work to develop a framework for encouraging more clinical trials in WA.
- Following a period of consultation, an enabling framework for encouraging clinical trials will be published, with key dependencies identified that will support a lift in clinical trial activity. This will be the first time WA has had a focussed and targeted approach to supporting clinical trials and will contribute to improvement in competitiveness for national grant income.

Under the guidance of the WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023-2033, ongoing communication channels are being established to ensure that each of these strategic initiatives are informed by the entire health and medical research sector, and that new strategic priorities are identified and prioritised to ensure that WA's health and medical research sector is a thriving ecosystem, contributing to the diversification of WA's economy.

Opportunities for the future

While there is considerable work underway to support the research and innovation sector, there are always opportunities for further development. In particular, the Department of Health will be working closely with HSPs over the next 12 months to identify barriers to conducting high quality research, and implement strategies to maximise research, innovation and effective translation of research to real-world practice.

This plan is underpinned by the recent establishment of a Health Executive Committee focussed meeting for Research and Innovation. Occurring every eight weeks, the Director General, Deputy Director General and all HSP Chief Executives will meet to

discuss research, innovation and translation, an initiative which will elevate the priority of research and innovation in the WA health system to the highest level. The leadership shown by the Director General and Deputy Director General in establishing these regular focussed meetings demonstrates their commitment to research and innovation across the WA health system.

Further, the recent expansion of the Research Infrastructure Support (RIS) program of the FHRI Fund to universities and HSPs has necessitated greater coordination in HSPs to appropriately track, monitor and oversee clinically focussed research. HSPs have always appointed staff to provide ethical and governance reviews to oversee the conduct of research, however few have positions within the organisation who support the development of high-quality research applications, that are strategically aligned with the organisation's priorities and which have clear pathways for funding and translation. Most of the opportunities for the future of research and innovation in HSPs involve expanded leadership for research development, support for grant writing, provision of timely and accurate advice relating to IP and research contract negotiation and importantly, a clinical workforce who are supported and rewarded for conducting world-leading research and innovation.

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

WA has two key guiding documents which provide strategic direction and set the priorities for research in WA.

FHRI Fund Strategy

- The FHRI Fund, the state's Sovereign Wealth Fund, uses three strategic instruments to guide how and for what purposes it applies available funding:
 1. The Strategy – This provides a high-level vision and objectives which are aligned with the aims of the FHRI Fund.
 2. Priority Goals – These capture an approach, need or opportunity that has been determined to be critical to achieving the vision of the Strategy.
 3. Program or Initiative – This is a mechanism through which funding is directed to a specific purpose and contributes to achieving one or more of the Priority Goals.
- The FHRI Fund Strategy provides a high-level vision and goals for research and innovation in WA and forms the basis from which the Priority Goals are derived. The FHRI Fund Advisory Council leads development of the Strategy and the extensive consultations that inform this process. The Advisory Council recommends the Strategy to the Minister for Medical Research for approval. Planning to consult, review and develop a new FHRI Fund Strategy for 2024/25 is underway.
- An evaluation of the FHRI Fund Scheme is planned for 2024 which will evaluate the FHRI Fund strategic instruments (the Strategy, Priority Goals and Programs and Initiatives) and their effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the objects of the Act and provide findings and recommendations for improvement.

WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023-2033

- The Strategy includes six priority areas for health and medical research, developed through a robust consultation process. These six priority areas include:
 1. Aboriginal Health
 2. Consumer Engagement
 3. Precision Health
 4. Regional and Remote
 5. Digital Health
 6. Prevention.
- The Sector Advisory Panel, who provide oversight of the Strategy are currently preparing an implementation plan which will facilitate whole-of-sector input into the implementation of the Strategy, across these six priority areas.
- The Sector Advisory Panel comprises:
 - Ms Angela Kelly PSM, representing the Department of Health
 - Ms Rebecca Tomkinson – representing the Future Health Research and Innovation Fund Advisory Council;
 - Dr Debra Turner – representing the WA Health Translation Network;
 - Ms Linda Dawson – representing the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation;
 - Professor Dan McAulley – representing Aboriginal Health;
 - Professor Romola Bucks – representing Universities;
 - Dr Grant Waterer – representing Health Service Providers;
 - Ms Renee Hallam – representing Medical Research Institutes;
 - Professor Kevin Pflieger – representing Innovation;
 - Ms Bronwyn Le Grice – representing Digital Health;
 - Ms Deborah Attard Portugues – representing Research Foundations;
 - Mr Dylan Smith – representing Philanthropy; and
 - Mr Glenda Swinbourne – Consumer representative.
- There are other strategic documents that also shape health and medical research priorities in WA including:
 - WA Health and Medical Life Sciences Industry Strategy
 - WA Innovation Strategy
 - Sustainable Health Review.

WA Health Service Providers

- HSP research strategies are currently aligned with the Sustainable Health Review or to areas of clinical expertise and to what they perceive to be drivers of translational research and innovation.
- Following the introduction of the WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023-2033, HSPs have been encouraged to align their strategic planning to the strategy, to ensure a consistent, streamlined approach to health and medical research in WA.
- HSP priorities are varied, some are set by the clinical strength of the HSP, and others look to overarching statewide strategies such as the WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023-2033. Research priority areas across HSPs currently, include:
 - Client demand to support specific clinical and public health service requirements

- Future technological demands and infrastructure required
- Capacity building
- Infrastructure
- Knowledge generation, translation and implementation
- Research impact
- Leading the development of Patient Reported Outcomes Measures
- Patient reported experience.
- Specific clinical priorities include:
 - Improving the efficiency of laboratory services for PathWest
 - Measures for maternity care, gynaecologic oncology, endometriosis and preterm birth for King Edward Memorial Hospital.
- FHRI Fund is supporting HSPs in setting research priorities through a range of innovative funding programs:
 - Targeted Call – aims to facilitate the development of innovative solutions to ‘Business Challenges’ identified by the HSPs.
 - Collaborative Centres – Designed to support world-leading, research programs with international partnerships.
 - Fellowships – provides salary support for high performing early- to mid-career researchers to conduct projects that facilitate the translation of research findings into policy and/or practice.

3. The impact (of funding and priorities) on specific types of research and areas of need

WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023-2033

- The Department of Health has developed a 4-layered governance framework to support the Strategy, complemented by an implementation plan and evaluation plan. The 4 layers of governance include the Sector Advisory Panel, a government reference group, working groups and sector roundtables.
- The Strategy is being progressively implemented across 2-year, 3-year, 5-year and 10-year horizons.
- Implementation of the Strategy commenced in July 2023 and is focused on reaching Horizon 1 – 2024 – Strengthen WA’s research foundations.
- Horizon 1 seeks to strengthen research capability by collectively leveraging WA’s pre-existing research infrastructure and consumer engagement to identify opportunities which align with key focus areas. By focusing on WA’s core research priorities over this horizon, it will serve to strengthen the state’s research foundations and provide sustainable outcomes to move toward future horizons.
- Future horizons build on this work and focus on diversifying infrastructure, facilitating partnerships, investment and research translation and eventually promotion of research capabilities internationally to provide improved health, economic growth and future investments.

FHRI Fund Strategy

- Relevant State strategies such as the WA Health and Medical Research Strategy 2023-2033 will inform the next FHRI Fund Strategy and Priorities.
- It will be important to understand the WA burden of disease data, any crucial current and future issues for the WA health system and for the WA health and

medical research and innovation sector, to ensure that the FHRI Fund complements and enhances other available funding for health and medical research and innovation, and to ensure the funding provided through the FHRI Fund provides the greatest value for the WA community.

- The spread of funds awarded across the current FHRI Fund Priority areas is monitored by the FHRI Fund Advisory Council.

Ethics and Governance Reform

- In reforming the WA health system's research ethics and governance review processes to improve timeliness and introduce improved consistency of review, clinical trial sponsors will be encouraged to view WA as an attractive coordinating site for their multi-centre drug and medical device trials. This will build capability among researchers that will, in turn make WA an attractive place to conduct cutting edge medical research.

Opportunities for funding and priorities

- The formation of the FHRI Fund and the impetus provided by the appointment of a Minister for Medical Research and Innovation has engendered a new enthusiasm for research and research translation.
- Research translation and innovation form an integral part of building, maintaining, and delivering high quality health care for Western Australians. Initiatives to prioritise the embedding of research as an essential component of service delivery within the public sector is a current focus of the WA health system.
- Equally, the WA health system recognises it is a critical time as we move into a high complexity, high tech age that harnesses new technologies such as genomic testing to better understand disease process and how they can be treated and prevented, as well as branching out into advanced data generation, linking and analysis, and the new opportunities and challenges of artificial intelligence. Technological advancements in healthcare will continue to be prioritised.
- Unlike eastern states-based counterparts, the tyranny of distance limits WA-based researchers from the mix of regular casual, planned and opportunistic meetings that foster rich and sustained partnerships.
- Building cohesive collaborative groupings across the WA health system, universities, research institutions and commercial partners requires a mutual understanding of the agendas and drivers for the partners in these and addressing the operational and regulatory barriers to collaboration. Cohesive collaborations have the potential to create a flexible "ready-to-go" group that can respond to funding opportunities. Reform initiatives to address regulatory barriers to collaboration such as agreed approaches to assignment of intellectual property, complex ethics and governance processes and data sharing arrangements are already well underway and continue to be a focus for the WA health system.
- The Department of Health is seeing research entities diversifying their funding sources and decreasing their reliance on funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) and instead increasing revenue from the State's FHRI Fund and non-government sources such as charities and philanthropy. This may account for why WA is applying for national grants at a lower rate than other jurisdictions.