



Submission by the HEAL WA Network to the WA Inquiry into support for health and medical research funding and priorities

About the HEAL WA Network

The vision of the Healthy Environments and Lives (HEAL) Network is to catalyse research, knowledge exchange and translation into policy and practice that will bring measurable improvements to our health, the Australian health system, and the environment. The HEAL Network is a broad coalition of hundreds of members and more than 30 organisations from across Australia that aims to bridge the gap between knowledge and action by bringing together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wisdom, sustainable development, epidemiology, and data science and communication to address environmental and climate change, and its impacts on health and wellbeing across all Australian states and territories.

HEAL focuses on participatory solutions-driven research that provides robust scientific evidence to underpin structural policy and practice changes. To meet this need, our collaboration includes communities, community organisations, government health and environmental authorities; health sector organisations; Indigenous organisations; and data providers to integrate a complex social, environmental, economic and institutional ecosystem into a cohesive, multidisciplinary research network.

HEAL WA has a strong capacity to provide strategic advice on policy for the health impacts of environmental and climate change, and we welcome the opportunity to provide this submission to the WA Inquiry into support for health and medical research funding and priorities. The issues identified and recommendations below come from our work with HEAL WA members from across WA including the HEAL WA Aboriginal Steering Group.

In WA and Australia more broadly, we have the privilege and opportunity to learn from the oldest continuing cultures developed over tens of thousands of years to live sustainably with the environment in ways that maintain health and wellbeing. The HEAL Network in WA is grounded in a respectful weaving together of Aboriginal science and wisdom and the best of Western science.

HEAL WA responses to the inquiry terms of reference

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

Government and non-government funders of health research are increasingly prioritising research that is grounded in co-design with community(s) and that addresses community priorities. This kind of research requires a much more sophisticated, holistic, transdisciplinary, and collaborative approach that is capable of true co-design with the full range of stakeholders including community members, community groups, trans-disciplinary experts, multi-sectoral policymakers and service providers, academic researchers, individuals with diverse lived experiences, advocates, and other stakeholders. To increase Western Australia's small share of national competitive funding we need to increase our capacity to deliver this kind of transformational research that delivers real benefits and improved health and wellbeing



outcomes for communities in WA and beyond. The Community Based Participatory Action Research methodologies that underpin the HEAL Network in WA exemplify this, and this is being recognised with high success rates in obtaining competitive research funding. Much of this funding has come from philanthropic and international competitive research sources so there is great potential in this space to increase Western Australia's share of national competitive funding. True co-design with communities is key to this success including with the HEAL WA Aboriginal Steering Group and the HEAL WA Communities of Practice at local, regional and state levels. The HEAL Network in WA is keen, ready, and able to work with the WA government to improve WA's share of national competitive health research funding.

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

As per our response to terms of reference 1 above, the key to increasing WA's share of national (and international) competitive health research funding is to enable more true co-design with communities and other stakeholders. Nowhere is this more important than it is regarding the identification and co-design of health and medical research priorities. The HEAL Network in WA has substantial skills and experience in working with communities and other stakeholders to identify and co-design health and medical research priorities. Here again, we are keen, ready, and able to work with the WA government to improve the fit between the state's health and medical research priorities and the needs and priorities of the communities in WA.

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

Global temperatures are at record highs, Communities are experiencing ever more frequent disasters, and our social, economic, and political systems need to adapt rapidly to the impacts of climate change. Indeed, climate change is recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and leading medical journals (e.g., The Lancet, The New England Journal of Medicine) as the biggest global health threat of the 21st century. Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change for reasons including immature neurodevelopmental and physical development, emerging immune systems, higher metabolic and respiratory rates, and smaller body size with a higher intake per unit body mass. Children already suffer around 90% of the disease burden associated with climate change. Unfortunately, because climate change is rapidly intensifying and occurring at much faster pace than anticipated, these harmful associations and outcomes are going to worsen and multiply, seeding costly chronic and novel morbidities and early-life mortalities.

In the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, scientists issued their strongest warning yet and highlighted the massive climate change impacts already being experienced around the world. The report highlighted that the current national greenhouse gas reduction commitments from countries around the world are completely inadequate to limit global warming to the relatively safe level of 1.5°C. Western Australia is among the global regions most susceptible to climate change and has an increasingly hostile climate with many highly at-risk children and adults requiring protection.

The WHO recognises that there are many health outcomes effected by climate change: an increase in injury and mortality from extreme weather events, heat related illnesses, respiratory illnesses, water borne disease and other water related health impacts, zoonoses,



vector borne disease, malnutrition and food borne diseases, non-communicable diseases and mental and psychosocial health can all be affected. Then there is the impact on the health system and health care facilities themselves. Clearly, investigating the effects of climate change on health and wellbeing must be an urgent research priority at global, regional, and local levels. However, it is also noted by the WHO that while ‘the majority of countries identify health as a priority sector vulnerable to climate change... Less than 2 per cent of multilateral climate finance goes to health projects.’ So, there is much work to do to ensure that funding matches need in this space.

Although the WA Government has some initiatives in place to mitigate climate change in alignment with the WA Climate Policy, WA ecosystems are already at critical thresholds, according to the WA Environmental Protection Agency 2023 report. Given that current greenhouse gas reduction commitments are completely inadequate to limit global warming to the relatively safe level of 1.5°C and, according to the UN Climate chief, we are likely to experience more extreme weather and heat within the next two years, the negative effects of climate change on the health and wellbeing of West Australians will continue to amplify. To strengthen and begin necessary new investigation of mitigation strategies for the impact of climate change on health now, we strongly recommend that the impact of climate change on health and wellbeing, particularly of priority populations such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples, people living in remote/rural communities, and children, must be a top consideration in the state’s research and other priorities.

Because of the rapidly growing number of researchers, community members, and other stakeholders that are working in the space, WA is well placed to accelerate climate change and health and wellbeing research. The Aboriginal and broader WA communities that we work with (with a particular focus on those that are most at-risk) have identified the health and wellbeing impacts of climate change as a high priority for research and have identified a number of foci for this research. Unfortunately, national and other research funders have been slow to respond with targeted funding opportunities for this research. The rapid acceleration of climate change and the associated impacts on health and wellbeing mean that urgent action is required at state and national levels to fund and support this critical research. We urge the WA government to fund and support more research focused on identifying, preventing and addressing the impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing.

Key recommendations:

1. Community Based Participatory Action Research methodologies, such as those used by the HEAL network, be used to increase the WA share of nationally competitive funding.
2. The impact of climate change on health and wellbeing, particularly in priority populations such as children, be considered as a top research priority in WA (this should be across the full spectrum of research from basic/discovery science, epidemiology, through to the co-design of research translation into policy and service provision with community and other stakeholders).
3. The HEAL WA network collaborates with the WA government to create or fund new initiatives.