

# Response ID ANON-QZ7X-DD7R-B

Submitted to **Medical Research Future Fund consultation to inform the third Australian Medical Research and Innovation Priorities 2020-2022**

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## Introduction

### 1 Full name

**Full Name:**

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### 2 Submission type

Organisation affiliated

### 3 Organisation type

Non-government

### 4 Organisation sub-type

University

### 5 Residential state or territory

Victoria

### 6 Do the current Priorities remain relevant in the contemporary environment for continuation for a further 12 months?

**250 word limit:**

The current and enduring challenges resulting from COVID-19 have only intensified the need for health and medical research in many of the nominated Priority areas. However, there is a current imbalance in the investment in Priorities relative to their potential impact on community health. It is essential that MRFF investments are sharply focused to address Australia's immediate needs for maintaining health, wellbeing and a sustainable health system, whilst providing economic stimulus.

Assuming continuation of the current Priorities in this contemporary environment, it is important for AMRAB and the Department of Health to consider the following:

(i) Pivot the current strategies for "how each Priority is best addressed" in consideration of the changed environment. Some of these approaches are no longer relevant or have already been attempted – a fresh view is required.

(ii) Revisit the relative focus on each Priority foremost with consideration of the current environment together with some secondary consideration of previous investment levels, particularly where investment is missing or low relative to potential returns, such as Ageing and Aged Care, Primary Care and Prevention/Public Health.

(iii) Consider opportunities to target multiple Priorities at once where programs can be designed to deliver benefits in multiple areas of need and spanning health, economic and workforce outcomes. For example, specific funds could be directed to health services research/implementation projects in any area of priority.

(iv) Specifically nominate mental health as a focus within the relevant Priorities or consider its inclusion as a standalone Priority.

### 7 Should any of the Priorities be emphasised or de-emphasised for the next 12 month period?

**If you answered YES, please indicate what specific priorities and why? (max 250 words):**

Global Health and Health Security - Australia has successfully leveraged research capability in the public health response to COVID-19. Major research advances continue to be made across a range of areas including epidemiological modelling and vaccine development. This Priority should be maintained to guide the ongoing COVID-19 response, particularly in regional LMIC, to prepare for the next global health challenge, and to deliver advances that can be leveraged into other aligned areas to maximise return on investment.

Ageing and Aged Care - Any research-relevant outcomes of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety will certainly be a focus. Until those outcomes are finalised there are still wide-ranging opportunities to improve ageing Australians' quality of life through high impact, interdisciplinary research, however major investment is needed to drive outcomes. Studies of optimal models of care, and creation of new assisted living technologies and strategies to delay frailty and cognitive decline should not wait for outcomes of the Royal Commission.

Primary Care Research/Public Health Interventions - Australia will hugely benefit from evidence-based innovations in prevention and self- or community based-management of health and wellbeing. Previous MRFF programs have funded few projects in narrow focus areas, and the investment to date is not proportionate to the importance nor the opportunity to prevent more expensive tertiary care. The lack of support for Practice-Based Research Networks remains a challenge for effective primary care research and further increased research activity is required in prevention and public health including physical activity, with a strong lens on socioeconomic determinants, to support sustainable health care in the new economic climate where health vulnerability will increase.

**If you answered NO, please indicate what specific priorities and why? (max 250):**

By virtue of emphasising some Priorities, other Priorities are necessarily de-emphasised. We don't believe that there are specific Priorities which should be further de-emphasised or removed, however the relative investment and new major investments in some areas should be carefully considered.

For example, investment in a large Drug Repurposing program as described in the current Priority listing is unlikely to deliver significant impact over a 12-month period as compared to needs-based projects, and therefore may be best delivered under a new Strategy and new Priorities. Comparative Effectiveness Research by contrast has not been a major focus on existing programs, but new programs can deliver significant impact on health and savings to healthcare budgets.

**8 Are there any unaddressed gaps in knowledge, capacity and effort across the healthcare continuum and research pipeline that would warrant changes to the Priorities?**

**If you identified a gap, please explain how it should be addressed in the 2020-2022 MRFF Priorities (max 250 words):**

Whilst the Priorities remain broadly relevant, the associated Why and How should be updated to the current context considering the immediate needs and ensuring translational outcomes.

Updated Priorities should, wherever relevant, consider themes of mental health. The challenge of mental health in Australia needs a multi-faceted approach involving many funding agencies to include both project-based innovation and evidence-based, system-wide transformation. Including mental health within Priorities will ensure MRFF broadly complements the activities of other funding agencies and provides for project activity as well as addressing sector-wide challenges as part of the MRFF Million Minds Mission.

**If you identified a second gap please explain how it needs to be addressed in the 2020-2022 MRFF Priorities (max 250 words):**

Across the breadth of these Priorities, translation outcomes can be better supported by implementation science research and support for consumer engagement. Again, whilst each of these topics are addressed in part, they are yet to be strongly directed as a priority.

Adjusting the How against the current Priorities to include support for these activities would provide better value for money for research investment with translation of outcomes into system-wide change aligned to consumer needs and expectations.

**9 Is there an opportunity to consolidate the Priorities for the remaining twelve months of the Strategy?**

**Max 250 words:**

Whilst each of the Priorities remain as important focus areas for the remaining twelve months, to maximise outcomes there should be a greater focus on delivering against multiple Priorities through new programs or refocusing existing programs wherever possible.

For example, Digital Health Intelligence, Primary Care Research and Comparative Effectiveness Research can each target outcomes relevant to Strategic and International Horizons Priorities as well as other topics, and importantly boost workforce capability and justify investment in underpinning infrastructure to provide ongoing, broader benefits in these areas.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of telehealth we have seen that Digital Health can have a transformative impact on healthcare delivery. It is important that research investment in this area this is focused on evidence-based innovations designed for and within the Australian health system and community context.

**10 Do you have any additional comments in regards to the Priorities for 2020-2022?**

**Max 250 words:**

COVID-19 will cause a depression in the levels of research activity across Australia, in part due to the significant impact on the higher education sector with projected revenue losses of \$16 billion to 2023\*. The profile of the research workforce will change as a result, with early and mid-career researchers likely to have reduced opportunities and greater pressures on clinician researchers.

It is essential that the MRFF continues to support research of the highest quality that can deliver health, wellbeing and economic outcomes for Australia, but also support the translational and innovation focused workforce who are best placed to deliver innovations in a contemporary context. MRFF support for NHMRC EL1/2 Investigator Grants should be increased substantially to protect the careers of the next generation and focussed on nurturing the skills required to transform health.

The overall level of investment has been proportionately low in the Commercialisation strategic platform, and the associated priority on Translational Research Infrastructure. There is an opportunity to enhance Australia's economic recovery post-COVID through targeted investment in product-directed programs on new therapeutics, devices, diagnostics and medical technologies. In the remaining 12-month period this could be achieved via additional investment through the existing BTB or Frontiers programs, or via a new scheme of intermediate scale which complements these.

\*Universities Australia, 2020-21 Pre-budget Submission August 2020

**11 Do you consent to components of your submission being made publicly available?**

Yes