



Australian Academy
of Health and
Medical Sciences

AAHMS submission to the consultation on a joint National Health and Medical Research Council/Medical Research Future Fund Statement on Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation in Health and Medical Research

December 2023

The Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (AAHMS) welcomes draft National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)/Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) Statement on Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation in Health and Medical Research (the Statement).

AAHMS is Australia's Learned Academy for health and medicine – the impartial, authoritative, cross-sector voice for the sector. We advance research and innovation in Australia to improve everyone's health. We are an independent, interdisciplinary body of Fellows – elected by peers for outstanding achievements and exceptional contributions to health and medical science in Australia. Collectively, AAHMS Fellows are a representative and independent voice, through which we engage with the community, industry and governments.

Our response has been informed by input from Fellows of the Academy and will focus on answering the survey questions within our remit and expertise.

Q. What benefits should the Statement achieve?

The NHMRC and Department of Health and Aged Care (DoHAC) are responsible for promoting excellent research that benefits the whole community. The Statement should assist the NHMRC and DoHAC to achieve this goal by:

- Providing clear guidance to the research sector on when, why and how to implement sex, gender, variations of sex characteristics and sexual orientation into health and medical research.
- Enabling a unified response by the research sector when integrating sex, gender and diversity considerations into research.

Q. Is the guidance provided in the “What better practice looks like section” suitable? If not, what could be added or removed to strengthen the section?

The prompts in this section are thorough, however, it should be made clearer what is expected of applicants as they consider these questions – and in particular, the potential implications of not following the prompts. For instance, clearer instructions could help

researchers understand when compliance is expected and how they can demonstrate this through their funding applications.

AAHMS notes that the submission from the George Institute for Global Health recommends a series of practical examples that can be used to give these prompts greater context and provide clearer guidance for researchers. This section could benefit from incorporating this kind of addition.

Q. What do researchers, research organisations, consumers etc need to implement the Statement?

The Statement should be accompanied by other measures to ensure the research sector can adapt to the recommended changes in the approach to integrating sex, gender and diversity considerations into research. The Statement is an important foundation, but cannot – on its own – achieve the necessary shift in culture and practice that is required to see widespread and sustainable impact.

Coordinated, sector-wide activities to develop this kind of culture could include education and training that develops a shared understanding of sex and gender concepts. Training should be provided to both funding applicants and evaluators, and it should be set up to receive and adapt to feedback so that it can be responsive to sector needs. International examples could be used to help develop this training, such as those ongoing in the United States and Canada.

Q. Is there anything you would like to raise that is not otherwise captured by these questions?

To see the desired impact, the Statement must be implemented across the full Australian health and medical research landscape. AAHMS welcomes this as a starting point, however, the NHMRC and DoHAC should consider ways to ensure the Statement can be routinely implemented and that the consideration of sex, gender, variations of sex characteristics and sexual orientation can become commonplace in research.

It will also be essential to establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate implementation and outcomes – to ensure the Statement is having the intended impact.

AAHMS would encourage the NHMRC and DoHAC to engage with research centres with relevant expertise and experience, e.g. the new Centre for Sex and Gender Equity in Health and Medicine (launching in 2024), to ensure it can continue to receive the best advice in advancing the Statement's vision and purpose.

For questions about this submission, or to arrange a consultation with Fellows and Associate Members of the Academy, please contact Lanika Mylvaganam, Head of Policy (policy@ahms.org) at the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences. The Academy is grateful for the input received from our Fellows and Associate Members in developing this submission.

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