Australian Academy of Health & Medical Sciences

Securing Australia's Health Future

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From lecture halls to laboratory benches and patient bedsides, health and medical researchers are at the forefront of generating and translating groundbreaking research into real world outcomes that advance healthcare, inform policy, and save millions of lives.

Australia's successes in developing vaccines, treatments, and public health interventions range from the cervical cancer vaccine, the bionic ear and skin cancer prevention to the national bowel screening program, spray-on-skin and our world-renowned response to the HIV epidemic.

These remarkable achievements stand as testament to the power of prior investments in health and medical research and a deep culture of collaboration across our sector. These breakthroughs could not have been achieved without the support of successive federal governments.

But Australia now stands at a pivotal moment for the sector and the nation as it navigates an increasingly unpredictable geopolitical and trade landscape, alongside the ongoing challenges posed by issues such as climate change, pandemics, and an ageing population.

The development of Australia's first National Health and Medical Research Strategy presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the future of our health system, economy, and global standing in research and innovation. Australia must seize this opportunity to leverage health and medical research as a national strategic asset, ensuring it is adequately resourced and prioritised to future proof the nation.

The Academy is calling on all parties and candidates to commit to the development and implementation of this Strategy.

Without commitment across the political spectrum, and decisive action to capitalise on this pivotal moment to advance the development and delivery of this strategy, we risk undermining our research workforce, weakening our health system, and losing ground to international competitors.

Health and medical research is not just about discovery. It is a driver of economic growth, and a key way to ease cost-of-living relief through smarter, more affordable, and more accessible healthcare. It also acts as a foundation for building Australia's national resilience and domestic sovereign capability. Strategic investment in health and medical sciences can diversify Australia's economy, fortifying it against global uncertainty and ensuring we remain competitive and self-reliant on the world stage.

Our clinician researcher workforce, which is critical to embedding research and innovation into healthcare and its delivery, is shrinking. Research on women's health remains fragmented. Misinformation is slowly eroding public confidence in the health system, and the impact of climate change on health demands urgent research-led solutions. These challenges require not just vision, but action.

Australian health and medical research generates high-value jobs, reduces the burden of disease, and enables world-leading innovation. Yet, despite its clear economic and societal benefits, Australia's investment in health and medical research is in decline in real terms. As Australia navigates an increasingly complex international landscape, health and medical research must be recognised as a strategic asset essential for national prosperity, resilience and security. Australia now invests a smaller proportion of GDP in research and development than our global comparators in the OECD, slipping behind the ambitious investments of the UK, the US, and key Asian economies.

Australia must harness that same ambition to secure long-term prosperity and better health outcomes for the nation; to build future-fit health systems, maintain trust in health and medical science, and ensure equity in access to the latest health and medical expertise.

Future-fit health systems

Australia's health system is not just a service, it is a national institution. Underpinned by health and medical research, it upholds the principles of universal access, equity, and world-class care. But to remain fit for the future, we must embed research, innovation and environmental sustainability as fundamental pillars.

Right now, we are falling short. Our system faces mounting pressures, from rising rates of chronic disease to workforce shortages and the growing costs of care.

Meanwhile, misinformation and inefficiencies within the system undermine public trust and climate change presents a new frontier of health challenges. Australia has an opportunity to lead by ensuring our health system is backed by the latest, most rigorous scientific evidence and is designed to meet the demands of the future.

A health system that embeds research and innovation as core functions will deliver better patient outcomes and greater efficiency. Clinician researchers, who are our doctors, nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals working at the intersection of research and care, are the cornerstone of such a system. However, we do not have a clear picture of this workforce in Australia, and without a dedicated national strategy to support and grow the number of clinician researchers, we risk losing a vital driver of research translation and medical innovation.

At the same time, Australia's health system itself must be environmentally sustainable. While the healthcare sector is vital to protecting us from the effects of climate change, it is also a contributor to global emissions.

The Academy welcomes initial steps towards developing a National Health and Climate Strategy, but these efforts need serious investment and a plan for implementation to drive real change.

A future-fit health system is a system that is research-driven, clinician-led, and climate-resilient. The time to seize the opportunity to act and invest in a system that is smarter, stronger, and designed to serve Australians well into the decades ahead, is now.

Research and innovation as core functions of the health system

All parties and candidates should commit to an inclusive, continuing mechanism that is empowered to develop and implement strategies for embedding research and innovation as core functions of the health system.

Australia's health system is globally respected, delivering high-quality care to millions. But beneath this strength lies a systemic flaw that limits our ability to innovate and adapt: the absence of a coordinated, accountable, and enduring mechanism to embed research and innovation as core functions of healthcare delivery.

Unlike education, defence, or infrastructure, where national strategies and mechanisms align investment, performance, activities and priorities, health innovation is fragmented across jurisdictions and institutions. Unlike in comparable nations, such as the UK, there is no single, ongoing national mechanism that brings together governments, providers, researchers, and communities to align priorities, scale evidence-based innovation, and systematically translate research into better care.

It is this flaw – rather than the will, effort, or expertise within the sector – that means Australia is failing to realise the full benefits of its world-class research.[20]

During 2021-22, Australia spent 10.5% of GDP on health, and the OECD projects that this will rise

to 13% by 2030.[2,3] Without a coherent system-wide approach to embed research within healthcare delivery and ensure that the already significant public investment in health is leveraged for health and medical innovations, promising discoveries will remain siloed, implementation patchy, and the health system the ultimate casualty, missing out on the efficiencies, savings, and improved outcomes that could be achieved through integrated, evidence-driven healthcare.

In an increasingly complex global environment, strengthening our capacity to translate research into practice is not only about improving care; it is essential to our national resilience. A health system that embeds research at its core is more agile in responding to future pandemics, climate-related health threats, and shocks that may arise from evolving geo-political and security challenges.

Building this capability is a strategic investment in Australia's preparedness, sovereignty, and long-term stability.

Evidence from comparable jurisdictions globally demonstrates that research-rich health environments are better for patients and staff.[4] By embedding research and innovation at the heart of our health system, we can realise greater impact of our research efforts and improve health outcomes for all Australians, by:

- Building a future-proof system that delivers cutting-edge care.
- Fast-tracking Australia's efforts to rise to our health challenges.
- Better managing increasing cost pressures on the health system.
- Maximising the efficient use of existing resources.

Global and domestic economic uncertainties necessitate that Australia tackles these challenges with focused and impactful solutions that maximise existing investments and build on our national strengths. These solutions should include improved harmonisation between the diverse stakeholders involved in delivering a research-rich health system.[4]

An enabled workforce

All parties and candidates should commit to nurturing Australia's health and medical research workforce, including by developing a national strategy and implementation plan for sustainably building a world-class clinician-researcher workforce.

Australia's evidence-based health system is underpinned by a world-class research workforce. However, we currently risk losing our next generation of health and medical researchers to job insecurity and a lack of clear training and career pathways. Two groups at particular risk are clinician researchers and early-to-mid-career researchers (EMCRs).

Clinician researchers bridge the gap between research and practice, ensuring that healthcare is continuously informed by the latest evidence to improve patient outcomes. Both groups are essential components of a sustainable and competitive national research workforce, yet both face challenges that threaten retention and progression.

EMCRs working across the health and medical sciences drive innovation and represent the future of the Australian research sector.

Nurturing a representative cohort of clinician researchers and EMCRs, including First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) professionals, will ensure that Australian health and medical research benefits from the broadest – and therefore the best – talent pool. A diversity of perspectives and experiences are also vital to fostering research and innovation that advance health equity and support healthy communities across Australia.

Clinician researchers

Clinician researchers – including doctors, nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals – are fundamental to a system that delivers the best, most up to date care; they can secure better health outcomes by driving a culture of research and innovation.[4] Holding posts across both clinical services and research institutions, clinician researchers optimise the translation of research and work

within teams to undertake and implement research that effectively targets patient needs.

Despite the valuable contributions made by clinician researchers, their training and career pathways are often informal, unclear, and lack certainty.

For Australia to foster an environment in which clinician researchers are supported to grow and flourish, we must:

- Better define the clinician researcher workforce.
- Implement a formal, harmonised training and career pathway that allows clinician researchers to undertake both clinical and research work.
- Understand what attracts individuals to enter and remain in this career path.
- Understand this cohort's experiences and how they can be better supported.
- Provide more targeted support, based on experiences in the local context.
- Facilitate more strategic decisions about where clinician researchers are needed.

A national clinician researcher strategy and implementation plan can help achieve this, and the DoHAC, working with state and territory health departments, should invest in developing this strategy.

Early-to-mid-career researchers

Australia's early- to mid-career researchers (EMCRs) play a crucial role in our national health and medical research and innovation workforce; they represent the future of Australian health and medical research and innovation. However, the sector struggles to retain early career researchers, who presently move in significant numbers to other areas of the economy.

Over the five-year period June 2019-June 2024, 47% of postdoctoral fellows left the sector when they changed roles.[9] While the skills of former health and medical EMCRs are beneficial to the areas of the economy that they flow into, their transition away from health and medical research is a significant loss to the sector in which they developed their highly specialised skillsets.

Improving job security and access to grant funding will be key to retaining early career health and medical researchers.[9]

Whilst the Academy acknowledges the Government's EMCR Initiative provision of $384.2 million over 10 years between 2022-23 and 2031-32, we recognise that the challenges faced by EMCRs still threaten the sustainability of Australia's research workforce.[10]

We encourage all parties and candidates to continue investing to support and retain the EMCR workforce, and to do so efficiently by collaborating with EMCRs and research funders to develop their work in this area into holistic and sustainable funding solutions.

A sustainable, climate-resilient health system

All parties and candidates should commit to implementing the National Health and Climate Strategy, and making the National Health, Sustainability and Climate Unit a permanent fixture of the Department of Health and Aged Care.

With climate change threatening health outcomes, Australia needs a resilient health system. However, while the health system is essential in addressing climate impacts, the global healthcare sector is responsible for an estimated 5% of total greenhouse gas emissions.[11]

The National Health and Climate Strategy announced in 2023 outlined priorities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the Australian health system. It also addressed the impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing in Australia. However, while Australian communities continue to feel the impacts of climate change and our health system shoulders increasing burdens, the full potential of this Strategy is yet to be mobilised.

The Academy acknowledges that the Government has taken initial steps to fund the National Health and Climate Strategy, such as providing $3.4 million through the 2022-23 Federal Budget to create the National Health, Sustainability and Climate Unit, and allocating $5 million over five years to support research

aimed at improving climate-related health outcomes.[12] [13] [14]

For the National Health and Climate Strategy to fulfil its potential, these foundational investments must be built on through targeted funding of the Strategy's implementation.[15]

As an immediate priority, the Academy is calling for permanent funding to establish the National Health, Sustainability and Climate Unit as an enduring unit within DoHAC, and a further investment to support the delivery of Action 4.8 of the Strategy – building a framework for reducing emissions by optimising models of care.[12] These investments will enable the Government to work with professional bodies to secure a cleaner, more resilient health system with reduced emissions and enhanced patient outcomes.

The Academy encourages all parties and candidates to resource the implementation of its National Health and Climate Strategy, thereby protecting Australians from the health impacts of climate change while reducing the impact that the health system has on the climate.[12]

Trust in health and medical science

Trust is the foundation on which effective health systems are built. Without public confidence in the integrity of our health and medical research ecosystem, even the most groundbreaking discoveries can fail to achieve their potential impact. Today, this trust is increasingly threatened by misinformation, disinformation, and the politicisation of scientific evidence.

Australia's health and medical research sector plays a crucial role in maintaining public trust by generating credible, high-quality evidence that underpins clinical practice, health policy, and regulatory frameworks. However, as the dissemination of information becomes faster and more fragmented, the challenge of ensuring the accuracy and authority of scientific evidence grows**.**

Now, more than ever, Australia must commit to building public confidence in the integrity of science, improving transparency, and enhancing communication to counter false narratives and promote evidence-informed decision-making.

Strengthening trust in health and medical science is not just fundamental to safeguarding public confidence and promoting evidence-informed decision-making; it is a national imperative that underpins the resilience and effectiveness of our entire health system.

The National Health and Medical Research Council

All parties and candidates should commit to increasing the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) funding beyond indexation over the next five years to offset the real terms decrease that it has seen to its funding since 2010.

To maintain and enhance public trust in Australia's health system, it is essential that this system consistently delivers high-value, world-class care to all Australian communities. For the Australian health system to continue to deliver this, it must be supported by a strong foundation of rigorous, high-quality evidence and innovation.

Securing the future of the research and innovation that enables a reliable and sustainable health system requires the government to deploy strategic and sustained investment through the NHMRC.

The NHMRC plays a pivotal role in shaping a health system that Australians can trust to care for their communities. By enabling vital discovery and public health research, the

NHMRC facilitates the reduction of low-value practices, improvements to clinical care, and evidence-informed policy and practice. The NHMRC achieves this by supporting a broad range of competitive investigator-led and priority-driven funding initiatives for individuals, teams and projects across the research pipeline.[8]

The breadth of activities undertaken by the NHMRC make it a critical component of Australia's health and medical research and innovation landscape; it is the main funder of discovery and public health research, pursues numerous strategies to promote research translation into clinical practice, and supports the commercialisation of research discoveries.[8]

Although successive budgets have seen annual funding for research and innovation through the NHMRC increase due to indexation, increases have remained well below inflation and have declined in real terms over the decade from 2010 to 2020[4], from an equivalent value of $964 million to $900 million.[4] This represents a drop in funding per capita over the same period from $43.50 to $35.00.[4]

Investment in health and medical research is an investment in the efficacy and credibility of the Australian health system. The NHMRC will be a crucial partner in implementing the National Strategy for Health and Medical Research.

Funding should be allocated commensurate with this responsibility to ensure that the benefits of the Strategy can be fully realised.

Empowering Australians through health literacy

All parties and candidates should commit to finalising and implementing the National Health Literacy Strategy to enhance public trust in healthcare and strengthen preventive health engagement, ensuring that all Australians can understand their own health and can access and navigate the best care for them.

Health literacy underpins good health outcomes; it empowers people to engage in preventive measures shown to reduce the risk of chronic disease and to access effective, evidence-based healthcare.

Currently, nearly 60% of Australian adults struggle to understand common health information such as instructions about medication use.[18] Meanwhile, the sprawling information ecosystem continues to further complicate the challenge of identifying and evaluating health and medical mis- and dis-information.

Misinformation and disinformation are complex challenges which demand multifaceted solutions. One important factor is equipping the population with the skills to better understand and manage their health.

A strategic approach to health literacy can empower people to play an active role in managing their health, engage in screening programmes. access health care as early as possible, and hold their governments and health providers accountable. It can also improve information resilience within the population and help people navigate the information ecosystem.

The Academy welcomed the Australian Government's prioritisation of a National Health Literacy Strategy in its 2021-2030 National Preventive Health Strategy,[19] as well as its subsequent consultation on the Framework for this Strategy.[18]

However, progress has stalled. By finalising and implementing the National Health Literacy Strategy, the government can realise the potential of this work to improve public understanding of evidence-based healthcare and strengthen engagement with preventive health measures.

This Strategy should be developed in coordination with the National Health and Medical Research Strategy currently under development to ensure a unified, joined-up approach to combatting health and medical misinformation and enhancing trust in research.

Equity in access to health and medical research

Access to high-quality health and medical research should not be determined by geography, socioeconomic status, cultural background, gender or any other such factor. Yet, systemic disparities in research funding, participation, and health literacy continue to leave many communities underserved and overlooked.

Achieving equity in health and medical research is about more than fairness; it is about unlocking the full potential of Australia's research ecosystem. When research funding, participation opportunities, and health interventions reach every community, Australia can realise its vision of a truly inclusive and impactful research landscape.

Addressing these inequities requires targeted investment in underserved areas, including rural, regional, and remote communities, and prioritising research that reflects the diverse health needs of all Australians. It also demands a stronger commitment to ensuring that First Nations health and medical research is supported and integrated as a critical component of the nation's health and medical research agenda.

The Academy calls on all parties and candidates should commit to implementing structural reforms that make research opportunities accessible to all, regardless of background or location, and to ensure the benefits of health and medical research are shared equitably across the nation.

Coordinating and leveraging research on women's health

All parties and candidates should commit to the development of a comprehensive National Plan for Women's Health Research to coordinate and enhance investment in research on women's health.

Targeted investment is required to:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of research gaps in women's health across multiple disciplines.
- Build a national research strategy that ensures systematic, inclusive, and balanced attention to all facets of women's health.
- Facilitate collaboration among leading health and research organisations.

Women and girls continue to face more barriers than men and boys when it comes to accessing health information and services.[17] These barriers include lower literacy rates, gender- and sex-based discrimination, and inadequate provider training.

Improving gender- and sex-based health equity requires us to address the fact that research on women's health in Australia remains fragmented, limiting our ability to address persistent disparities in health outcomes, treatment access, and workforce participation.

Current funding approaches see specific conditions often receiving attention based on advocacy strength rather than strategic priority – an *ad hoc* approach that leaves significant gaps unaddressed and undermines efforts to improve health outcomes for all women across Australia.

By developing a comprehensive National Plan, we can ensure sustained funding for priority areas such as menopause, reproductive health, and chronic disease in women. To be most effective, a strategic research approach to women's health should emphasise cross-disciplinary research that recognises the complex relationships between reproductive and non-reproductive health while strengthening national data collection and research infrastructure.

In addition, the National Plan for Women's Health Research would be an opportunity to maximise the impact of investment in women's health by addressing disparities in research funding and aligning with broader national health priorities.

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