



The Australian Society for Medical Research

11th November 2005

Ms Jill Irvine
Healthcare Workforce Study
Productivity Commission
PO Box 80
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RE: Productivity Commission Position Paper

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is the peak body representing health and medical researchers. In addition to direct membership, ASMR represents the sector through 47 affiliated professional societies and Medical Colleges, representing some 15,000 people actively involved in health and medical research in Australia. In addition, corporate and disease related foundation memberships bring a further 100,000 Australians with an interest in health and medical research into association with ASMR. Our mission is to foster excellence in Australian health and medical research, and to promote community understanding and support for health and medical research in Australia. ASMR achieves these goals through public, political and scientific advocacy. I am writing on behalf of ASMR Board to submit comments on the Productivity Commission Position Paper.

In summary, we present our assessment that the efficient and effective delivery of health services including a health workforce that can adapt to a demographically changing environment that needs to keep pace with technological advances, and rising health costs, must be underpinned by support of medical research within the health care setting. Current support of health care workers conducting quality peer reviewed research is limited and improved education, training and resources will accelerate the response to current and emerging issues within the health care arena. We believe that investment to develop and encourage medical research within the health workforce will lead to long term gains in quality and timely health care being delivered to areas of need. This is essential in order to build long term capacity to meet Australia's future health workforce needs, manage health care costs and keep pace with technology.

Yours sincerely,

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ASMR President Elect
Executive Director

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Honorary Secretary
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Overview

Australian health and medical research has historically made a significant impact on international health gain, well-being and knowledge-based economic growth. World class achievements by Australian medical researchers, such as the development of the bionic ear, the discovery of *Helicobacter pylori* and its link to peptic ulcer, and ground breaking scientific research that has led to the development of an effective cervical cancer vaccine, have improved our quality of life and reduced the burden of disease. Investment in medical research has not only saved and improved countless lives but has also saved significant amounts of money for the Australian community. Underpinning the knowledge, health and wealth gains is a highly-trained health and medical research workforce. However, we believe there a number of barriers towards maintaining this appropriately trained workforce as we have detailed below:

Specific Responses to key themes of Productivity Commission Paper:

1. Considerations of supply incorporating the health and education sectors affecting the supply of health workforce professionals, such as their entry, mobility and retention

In order to respond to changing health needs, health care workers in Australia apply “best-practice” principles to their workplaces. The education sectors must continue to provide graduates trained in critical thinking and research methodology so that these workers can play a part in deriving these “best-practice” principles based on the evidence in their workplaces. Research training of clinicians, medical scientists, nurses, pharmacists and physiotherapists will fully equip those working at the “coal-face” to discover the emerging trends. Medical research should continue to be encouraged and supported within the health care system. These endeavours will not only have a positive impact on the health of Australians, but may also have a positive effect on workplace attractiveness, employee satisfaction and retention.

2. Consider the structure and distribution of the health workforce and its consequential efficiency and effectiveness

In order for health care to be delivered in an efficient and cost effective manner while incorporating technological advances, it requires a well-trained and adaptable workforce. Rural areas and remote areas are currently under resourced. In order to address issues facing rural and remote communities, research specific to health issues facing these regions must be addressed. Distribution of the health workforce in rural areas may benefit by offering research to attract the best and brightest to these regions. Benefits will flow back into community as rural or indigenous health problems can be researched and resolved where the need is greatest thus increasing efficiency and effectiveness. For example, there is a greater rate of hospitalisation of adults with asthma in rural or remote areas, compared with adults who live in major cities and regional areas (728 *vs.* 331 patient-days per 100,000). Hospitalisation rates for Torres Strait islander and indigenous Australians are also high compared with other Australians (1003 *vs.* 418 patient-days per 100,000). The reasons for these inequalities in asthma outcomes are currently unknown; but these are just two examples where appropriate distribution of the health workforce across rural and remote communities will allow the health workforce to effectively address emerging health needs, including indigenous health.

3. Consider the factors affecting demand for services provided by health workforce professionals

Medical research will advance the technologies and therapeutics used for patient care, to reduce the burden of disease and increase quality of life. Training of health care workers in basic sciences and research skills will allow them to keeping pace with technology. Critical thinking

skills will allow that the benefit of these technologies can be assessed and adapted for each health care setting. We believe that encouraging medical research within the health workforce will lead to long-term gains in quality and timely health care being delivered to areas of need.

Relevant References

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Exceptional Returns – The Value of Investing in Health R&D in Australia, Access Economics Report 2003.

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