

AMRAB July 2019 meeting communique

All members of the Australian Medical Research Advisory Board (AMRAB) met in Canberra on 26th July 2019, jointly with staff from the Health and Medical Research Office (HMRO). The Board noted and endorsed the progressive implementation of open and transparent allocation of funding for the various components of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) program, as defined in the 2019 budget, and made a number of recommendations to further facilitate effective program implementation.

- 1) The Board noted the positive step represented by the creation of the Health and Medical Research Office within the Commonwealth Department of Health, and welcomed the Chief Executive Officer, Masha Somi, who presented on the proposed structure and function of the HMRO.
- 2) Noting that the 2019 Federal Budget papers committed the MRFF to specific programs over the next 10 years, including 8 Missions and the Frontiers program, Board members discussed ongoing roles for AMRAB to facilitate these programs. The Board recommended that:
 - a. AMRAB should have an oversight role for the various MRFF programs, to facilitate their conduct consistent with the Research Strategy and Research Priorities proposed by AMRAB and approved by the Minister. The oversight role should include:
 - i. continuing to consult with the community and researchers on Research Priorities and Research Strategies for MRFF funding within the various MRFF programs
 - ii. assisting the expert panels, currently advising the Minister on the management of the various MRFF missions, in selection of the specific areas of research to be funded
 - iii. advising on the process and criteria for judging and managing the future funding rounds of the Frontiers program
 - iv. continuing to advise the Minister and HMRO on MRFF funding mechanisms, on future Research Priorities and Research Strategies, and on evaluation of outcomes from the various funded research programs.
- 3) The Board received reports from HMRO on the progress of the 8 MRFF Missions. Noting the positive progress achieved to date by the Mission Expert Advisory Committees towards defining goals for the missions, the Board recommended the following.
 - a. As the current Mission expert advisory committees were likely to include many members who would have potential conflicts when considering in more detail the selection of programs for funding, the role of these short-term committees should be to recommend broad programs of research for the Missions. These recommendations should be reviewed by AMRAB and by international experts in the field of each Mission, prior to submission to the Minister, to ensure alignment with MRFF Research Priorities and Strategies and appropriateness to Australia's needs.

- b. An independent management process should be established for the allocation of funding within the Mission, avoiding potential conflicts of interest.
 - c. AMRAB could play a role in managing communication between Missions and in joint planning of research programs.
 - d. The Board expressed the opinion that management of each Mission should be reviewed from time to time by an AMRAB member, to ensure a 'whole of MRFF' perspective.
 - e. AMRAB, through the HMRO, should facilitate a regular meeting of the chairs of the expert advisory committees of all 8 Missions to facilitate synergies in research.
- 4) The Board reviewed the excellent progress towards assessment of potential Frontiers programs and recommended the following.
- a. There should be a further Request for Proposals to enable selection of a further (second) cohort of 10 first-round Frontiers awards in Q4 this year, in compliance with the plans for the Frontiers program.
 - b. Future cohorts of 10 proposals should be recruited at two-yearly intervals to match funding distribution to funding availability.
 - c. The first cohort (Cohort 1) of 10 funded proposals should be evaluated Q2 2020 for round 2 funding. This review should be led by a member of AMRAB, and be carried out by an independent expert international advisory committee. The 10 funded Cohort 1 proposals should be given an opportunity to present to the Minister and AMRAB next year, prior to international review, and should also be given an opportunity to pitch to interested venture capitalists, at or about the time of the international review.
 - d. The best 3 of the Cohort 1 round 2 proposals that are not offered funding following the Cohort 1 round 2 review should also be given the opportunity to present in the Cohort 2 round 2 review, along with the 10 selected Cohort 2 proposals.
- 5) The Board reviewed the HMRO's proposal for ongoing evaluation of the components of the MRFF funding and recommended that:
- a. all MRFF funded entities and programs should be required to provide data that address the review criteria to HMRO, at a frequency determined by the HMRO.
- 6) The Board noted that all Missions had been asked to consider their need for further research talent appropriate to their Missions, and how this need matched with currently available supply, and recommended that:
- a. a general audit of the biomedical research community talent pool would be useful, and should be explored in conjunction with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), in part as a baseline to assess the

increment in researcher talent that might be attributed to the MRFF funding

- b. while some research talent could be recruited this year through judicious selection of near-miss NHMRC Investigator Grant applications, these researchers should be funded from the Mission budgets, and a Mission-specific process for talent recruitment should be developed for future years.
- 7) The Board noted the HMRO's proposed measures for overall assessment of the achievement of the goals of the MRFF across all programs, and recommended that:
 - a. all MRFF funding recipients be informed of the likely evaluation measures, so that funding recipients could proactively gather the necessary data
 - b. some measures (e.g. employed staff) should be objective and others (e.g. research translation) would be best portrayed through success stories.
- 8) The Board considered the need for key infrastructure for MRFF activities and recommended that:
 - a. as this would likely overlap with NHMRC needs and could be better considered as a part of a need for National Research Infrastructure, this might best be considered through joint submissions to government from the NHMRC, MRFF, Australian Research Council and the National Science and Technology council.
- 9) The Board noted the need for international benchmarking and recommended that:
 - a. the current activities of the HMRO in this area be continued.
- 10) The Board noted and endorsed the plans for reviewing MRFF Priorities in 2020 and recommended that:
 - a. widespread community consultation should occur in compliance with the MRFF Act
 - b. where possible, consultation should be conducted along with consultations on research road-mapping and priority setting being conducted by the individual MRFF Missions
 - c. at least one consultation should be conducted in a location where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities would have easy access for participation.
- 11) The Board noted the continuing engagement of the MRFF with the research community and recommended that:
 - a. such engagement should include discussion of the activities of the MRFF and the Board
 - b. the HMRO prepare updated material for the website and as a PowerPoint presentation to assist with this activity.

12) Members noted that while the current activities within the MRFF-funded programs could be overseen by AMRAB and the HMRO, it would be highly desirable to avoid the significant potential for conflicts of interest that could arise if management and evaluation of the Missions and Frontiers programs is undertaken by researchers in these programs. The Board therefore recommended that:

- a. the Government establish a National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) in alignment with the UK model
- b. oversight of the Missions and Frontiers programs should one of the tasks allocated to an NIHR.