



New MRFF funding empowers early to mid-career researchers to tackle significant health challenges

As part of the 2nd 10-year Investment Plan for the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF), \$384.2 million over 10 years from 2022-23 will be provided for early to mid-career researchers in the first 10 years of employment since completing postgraduate research training (excluding career disruptions). This funding will enable Australia's most talented emerging leaders in health and medical research to make breakthrough discoveries and tackle some of Australia's greatest health challenges.

About the early to mid-career researchers grant opportunity

The new funding will support emerging leaders by providing 3 grant streams:

Stream 1 (Incubator): \$84 million for early stage, small scale research, led by early-career researchers, that seeks to assess the potential and feasibility of novel strategies to address a critical or intractable health issue.

Stream 2 (Accelerator): \$206 million for establishing a large-scale interdisciplinary research program, led by mid-career researchers, that drives implementation of substantial improvements to health care and/or health system effectiveness.

Stream 3 (Targeted Call for Research): \$95 million for utilising co-funding between the MRFF, a sponsoring academic organisation and partner organisation(s) to accelerate translation of research led by early to mid-career researchers.

The streams support EMCRs to develop research innovations that can be translated into practice in priority areas. The intended outcome of the research funded by this grant opportunity is to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians.

Consultation helped shape the grant opportunity

The Department consulted with EMCRs in early 2021 to find out what might support the next generation of health and medical research leaders to meet the challenge of improving the health of Australians.

EMCRs nominated by peak research bodies, universities and medical research institutes met with the CEOs and staff from the Department responsible for the MRFF and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) at the EMCR Roundtable on 6 May 2021.

High on the agenda for EMCRs was emphasising how tough it can be to make the transition from being an emerging researcher to becoming a successful leader in health and medical research. One reason for this, says Professor Tracy Burrows, Researcher Fellow at the School of Health Sciences, University of Newcastle, is that it is very difficult for EMCRs to attract research funding in competition with established experts.

As a result, says Dr Kalinda Griffiths, an early career Scientia Lecturer at the Centre for Big Data Research at the University of NSW and a Yawuru woman from Broome, EMCRs describe the first 5-10 years after completing research training as 'the valley of death'. 'If they don't find funding, they become unemployed, lose the limited time required to produce outputs, and have no choice but to move on to other careers.'

Clinician researcher Dr Katrina Randall, an allergy specialist and immunologist at the Canberra Hospital carries on her research unpaid. Because 'funding and opportunities for EMCRs are really tight', Katrina only works three days a week so that she can continue her research at the Australian National University where her position as an Associate Professor is honorary.

New access to funding for EMCRs

The EMCR grant opportunity will address the need of emerging leaders by providing targeted funding that enables EMCRs to lead research projects as named investigators. The funding will also encourage EMCRs to collaborate and embed a wider range of perspectives in health and medical research.

Since EMCRs play an important role in carrying out the bulk of health and medical research, they are already at the front line of research innovation. Dr Katrina Randall says that supporting emerging health and medical research leaders promises to give us more 'really brilliant science'.

Ongoing commitment to listening to the sector

The new funding for EMCRs is an outcome of the Department's commitment to listening and engaging effectively with the health and medical research sector. In response to other recent feedback the Department introduced more improvements that will assist EMCRs. These include revised MRFF grant guidelines and better communication about MRFF grant opportunities.

Recent updates to MRFF grant opportunity guidelines:

- Project teams are assessed for including researchers at all career stages
- Researchers need to present their top 5 most relevant publications to demonstrate their capacity to deliver the project
- An increase in the number of Chief Investigators who can be attached to grant applications (creating more room for EMCRs)

Better communication about MRFF grant opportunities in:

- the CEO's quarterly webinar
- Department of Health social media feeds on MRFF activities
- MRFF news stories

Feedback to other EMCR stakeholders

Not all challenges faced by EMCRs can be solved by Department funding and/or policies, especially in the short-medium term, therefore health and medical sector engagement and collective effort is required. CEOs and staff from the Department and NHMRC and EMCRs involved in the consultation gave feedback about these broader issues at the EMCR Stakeholder Roundtable on 14 October 2021.

Stakeholders attended from a broad cross section of the research sector, including Australian academies, university and medical research representative groups, industry and peaks.

EMCRs rate the Department's consultation

Professor Tracy Burrows says the EMCR consultation was 'a pretty positive experience. We voiced the different issues EMCRs face and were encouraged to suggest strategies to address them'. This was important because some ways of addressing the issues might not turn out to be useful to EMCRs, who are well positioned to contribute ideas on what they need to be successful.

According to Dr Kalinda Griffiths, the Roundtable was an innovative model that enabled the diverse voices of emerging researchers to be represented at a national level in a systematic way. 'It was one of the first times that I have seen this done and it is a real kudos to the team that they achieved this result', she says. 'This is how to create new systems: bring diverse and representative voices together, discuss solutions, implement change. Now repeat!'



Professor Tracy Burrows



Dr Kalinda Griffiths

Read more about the EMCR Consultation Roundtables on the [MRFF consultations webpage](#).

