

30 March 2011

The Hon Julia Gillard MP
Prime Minister
Member of the Expenditure Review Committee
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Gillard

I write on behalf of the Australasian Epidemiological Association, the organisation of professionals involved in epidemiological and public health research.

We wish to advise you it is crucial that the Australian Government at least maintains current levels of funding for medical research in the May budget.

By placing a greater focus on prevention of disease, your government has been responsible for welcome change in Commonwealth health funding priorities. By commissioning the National Preventative Health Taskforce to develop a strategy to guide the Government in tackling the burden of chronic disease – particularly in respect of obesity, tobacco, and excessive consumption of alcohol – you have acknowledged the strong science underpinning identification of modifiable risk factors for chronic disease to which my members have contributed. Targeted chronic disease interventions now have the potential to make a large impact but, as acknowledged by the Taskforce, the translational aspects of how best to deliver those interventions are uncertain. To improve disease prevention strategies, more research is needed to determine when and how to intervene.

Current funding for medical research is adequate only to finance around 23% of research proposals, and cuts to that funding could compromise the delivery of the National Preventative Health Strategy. Any such cuts would also depreciate the value of past investments by previous Australian Governments in epidemiological and data linkage resources and capacity. The human and physical capital this has provided is of global significance and is the foundation for valuable new research findings. It requires continued funding to maintain and some increased funding to renew, particularly in respect of the need to retain a skilled workforce in the face of international competition.

Maintaining a vibrant research community is a fundamental platform also for an effective public health response to communicable disease and injury. Over the past two decades, it has been necessary to stem the spread in Australia of about 200 epidemics, including the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and H1N1 2009 influenza pandemic. Reducing medical research capacity will leave Australia threatened at a time when increasing population movements, changing climate and other pressures increase the likelihood that we will face new pandemics and the re-emergence of old ones.

In any cutbacks in funding for medical research, it is the epidemiological and public health research workforce that is most vulnerable. The type of research it produces – including major contribution to the identification of modifiable risk factors for chronic disease – is generally of the nature of a public good in the commons of the health of populations. Industry funders and charities make a valuable contribution to its production but, for the most part, it is not possible to replace public funding from private sources because most research in population health does not give rise to private ownership of intellectual property or patents over the use of research findings. Without maintained public funding, the capacity of this sector to continue to provide future health benefits will be severely compromised.

Finally, we note that The World Health Organization's forthcoming World Health Report for 2012 will be entitled "*No Health without Research*" and will have the three following aims:

1. To show that research is important for meeting health needs and improving health outcomes;
2. To encourage countries to therefore invest more resources in developing and strengthening their national health research systems;
3. To argue that countries should not see research as an expense or as an afterthought, but as an investment for a better, healthier future

An implication to be drawn is that in times of financial crisis and competing priorities, it is even more important that evidence and science informs health policy and decision making. To cut funding for medical research at this time would fly in the face of this wisdom.

Yours sincerely



Associate Professor Leigh Blizzard
President