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## Health's Management of the Medical Research Future Fund

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 [sta.org.au](http://sta.org.au)  
**ABN: 71 626 822 845**



To the Australian National Audit Office,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the audit of Health's Management of the Medical Research Future Fund.

Science & Technology Australia (STA) is the peak body representing more than 88,000 scientists and technologists in Australia. Our member organisations include specialist scientific societies, research institutes, and research strategy bodies such as councils of deans.

The Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) is an important part of our research system. STA is excited that the fund has now reached its \$20 billion target and will disburse regular funding each year.

The MRFF is a very different grant program to those facilitated by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). As such, STA understands that the way in which grants are awarded and administered is different.

In the preparation of this submission, STA consulted with its membership - specifically with our members that have had experience with the MRFF. Overall support for the MRFF is strong; however, we offer some recommendations for further improvement. These recommendations (listed below) enhance the effectiveness, transparency, and accessibility of the MRFF to the sector.

STA recommends:

- Transparent and public outlines of the selection process for every organisation involved in the selection of MRFF grants;
- Detailed selection reports summarising outcomes and success rates including analysis of success rates by sector, gender, geography and other key parameters;
- The MRFF institute standard application timeframes for all applications, with a minimum of 4 weeks;
- Scheme guidelines should include a published date for announcement of funded projects (under embargo);
- Great clarity of the governance structure of the MRFF and how it relates to the selection of priorities and administration of research initiatives;
- The publication of a consultation summary alongside new strategies and priorities that outlines how sector submissions are included in the strategy and priority documents;
- MRFF Strategies include a timeframe for the opening and closing of applications for each of the priorities;
- The different granting bodies administering the MRFF publish success rates of the medical research initiatives after each application round;
- A 15-20 working day delay of the start date be allowed before a review of the funding agreement is triggered; and
- The MRFF appoints a business manager with research project implementation experience to enhance understanding in the monitoring of projects.

Should the Audit Office wish to discuss our submission, we would be very happy to do so.

Kind regards,

Associate Professor Jeremy Brownlie  
President  
Science & Technology Australia

Misha Schubert  
CEO  
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## Introduction

Science & Technology Australia supports the Medical Research Future Fund. We are delighted to see this fund reach its \$20 billion goal this year. The steady investment in medical research that should now flow from its disbursements each year is welcomed warmly by the sector. Having reached this important milestone, it is timely to review the governance and management of the fund.

While the sector supports the MRFF, members of STA have highlighted some areas that can be improved to strengthen the governance and functionality of the MRFF.

STA's proposed improvements include:

- Transparent and public outlines of the selection process for every organisation involved in the selection of MRFF grants;
- Detailed selection reports summarising outcomes and success rates including analysis of success rates by sector, gender, geography and other key parameters;
- The MRFF institute standard application timeframes for all applications, with a minimum of 4 weeks;
- Scheme guidelines should include a published date for announcement of funded projects (under embargo);
- Great clarity of the governance structure of the MRFF and how it relates to the selection of priorities and administration of research initiatives;
- The publication of a consultation summary alongside new strategies and priorities that outlines how sector submissions are included in the strategy and priority documents;
- MRFF Strategies include a timeframe for the opening and closing of applications for each of the priorities;
- The different granting bodies administering the MRFF publish success rates of the medical research initiatives after each application round;
- A 15-20 working day delay of the start date be allowed before a review of the funding agreement is triggered; and
- The MRFF appoints a business manager with research project implementation experience to enhance understanding in the monitoring of projects.

## Are the MRFF governance arrangements effective?

### Selection process

One of the most significant concerns raised by STA members is how research initiatives are selected. Our members recognise there are differences between how MRFF projects are selected compared to NHMRC and ARC grants. Their concern is with the level of transparency on how the MRFF decision making process works.

Having multiple ways in which MRFF projects are selected is one reason why there is currently less transparency than for the other major granting funds. Given there are different bodies that assess

applications for the MRFF, publishing clear outlines on how decisions are made for each of these bodies would enhance transparency.

**STA recommends: Transparent and public outlines of the selection process for every organisation involved in the selection of MRFF grants.**

Funding schemes with high levels of transparency and rigour will publish selection reports of funding decisions. Moreover, selection reports guide applicants on understanding whether the scheme would align to their abilities and improve quality of submissions. Similar to the ARC and NHMRC reports, selection reports that cover success rates by sector, gender, institution, geography, and other key parameters should be published. The report should also track timing of schemes decision making and outcome announcements.

**STA recommends: Detailed selection reports summarising outcomes and success rates including analysis of success rates by sector, gender, geography and other key parameters.**

### Application timeframes

The other significant concern to STA members were the application timeframes on many MRFF research initiatives. These initiatives almost always require multi-institutional collaborations between industry, medical research institutes, and higher education providers. Given the high level of specificity that is associated with some of these application rounds, a short timeframe significantly limits the opportunities for researchers to prepare an application in conjunction with industry partners. Programs that fund multi-institutional research, like the Cooperative Research Centres, have a 3 month application window. As a similarly targeted program, there should be a minimum duration for which any application/scheme is open.

**STA recommends: The MRFF institute standard application timeframes for all applications, with a minimum of 4 weeks.**

MRFF support enables critical areas of research for Australia, supporting research careers and industry development. These are time critical, as they influence lives and products. We strongly encourage every scheme announced to have a fixed date for announcing funded projects, which would allow proactive planning. We understand the need to promote major government investments, and hence we would encourage the adoption of fixed announcement dates that have an embargo clause to allow media engagement activities at suitable times. Embargo clauses, like those used by the NHMRC and ARC, also allow projects to begin sooner through the hiring of research staff and the ordering of equipment.

**STA recommends: Scheme guidelines should include a published date for announcement of funded projects (under embargo).**

### Governance clarity

The governance of the MRFF is complex. It is not always clear to users how the Australian Medical Research Advisory Board (AMRAB) relates to the MRFF mission panels or how either of these groups ultimately influences the selection of research initiatives. In the most recent communiqué from the AMRAB, there was mention of a workshop to “optimise the effectiveness of the Missions in meeting their objectives” but is unclear to the sector how activities such as these ultimately result in the selection of research priorities or medical research initiatives.

**STA recommends: Great clarity of the governance structure of the MRFF and how it relates to the selection of priorities and administration of research initiatives.**

## Has MRFF legislation, governance, strategies, and priorities guided selection of medical research initiatives?

### Selection of research priorities

Some of our members have expressed concerns that while consultations occur in setting MRFF strategies and priorities, there is little clarity as to how these consultations are considered.

To improve transparency of the MRFF, a summary document outlining how consultations are considered in finalising strategies and priorities should be produced by the Department. Not only would this enhance transparency of the program for the public, but it would also provide researchers with a better understanding of the process to ensure the very best research is funded.

**STA recommends: The publication of a consultation summary alongside new strategies and priorities that outlines how sector submissions are included in the strategy and priority documents.**

### Public timelines for the opening of applications

Some STA members have concerns about the application timeframes for some MRFF funding opportunities. STA understands there may be some occasions when a short application process is necessary - such as to respond to a rapidly unfolding emergency situation. But to enable researchers and industry partners to properly prepare applications, including timelines with strategy and priority documents should be considered.

**STA recommends: MRFF Strategies include a timeframe for the opening and closing of applications for each of the priorities.**

### The public release of success rates

An important practice of both the NHMRC and ARC is the release of grant success rates after each round of funding. This is both an important practice for transparency but also allows the sector to provide feedback on the programs. This has led to improvements in aspects of the program including progress towards better gender equity in the pool of successful applicants. STA encourages the MRFF to adopt the practice of releasing application success rates similar to the practice of the NHMRC.

**STA recommends: The different granting bodies administering the MRFF publish success rates of the medical research initiatives after each application round.**

## Does Health effectively monitor, measure, and evaluate MRFF's performance?

### Requests for adjustments

One challenge STA members have raised is the trigger to request a review of the funding agreements. These triggers have been described as too stringent. For example, if an investigator reports a delay in achieving the first milestone (often due to delays in receiving the funding) then a process begins where multiple emails are sent requesting a review of the funding agreement.

STA agrees that there are times when funding arrangements need to be reviewed, especially when there are major or materially significant delays, however a greater measure of sensible flexibility would mean investigators feel more comfortable in honestly reporting unavoidable delays.

**STA recommends: A 15-20 working day delay of the start date be allowed before a review of the funding agreement is triggered.**

#### **Responsive support staff**

After consulting with our members, STA is encouraged by the reported responsiveness of the staff associated with the administration of the MRFF. This is particularly so with staff associated with the Sapphire and business.gov.au application portals.

One of STA's members has suggested the MRFF appoint a business manager with experience in research project implementation. A business manager with research experience would be able to engage better with stakeholders, as monitoring would be more contextualised (such as natural research-driven project changes or delays due to ethics approvals).

**STA recommends: The MRFF appoints a business manager with research project implementation experience to enhance understanding in the monitoring of projects.**