TRANSFORMING RESEARCH: TRANSFORMING LIVES

Launch of
NSW HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH STRATEGIC REVIEW 2012

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It is now fewer than sixty days until the 2012 Olympics and Australians will be watching as, once again, we punch above our weight and haul in a tally of medals many of them gold.

Of course, this will reflect great credit on our individual athletes, our teams, their coaches and the investment in their training and development which has been made by successive governments.

For a small nation we will be up there with the very biggest and the best.

Another area in which we punch above our weight is in gathering Nobel Prizes. Ten Australians have achieved this distinction and of those six won their awards in the category of physiology or medicine.

In officially receiving and responding to the NSW Health and Medical Research Strategic Review here at one of Australia’s and the world’s most pre-eminent medical research facilities, I wish to indicate that the NSW Government is determined to put NSW is firmly back on the agenda.

The provision of quality, timely and accessible health care to all the people of NSW is a fundamental commitment that we have made as a Government – it was the underpinning of the policies which we took to the last election and for which we received such an overwhelming mandate.
Quality health care is based upon having a skilled workforce, delivering services in the best possible facilities with the best possible equipment and being guided by the best possible evidence and practices that can be obtained.

All of those factors are underpinned by quality research which leads, in turn, to best practice and best outcomes.

For far too long medical research has been neglected, indeed diminished, as a key factor in improving personal and community health outcomes.

National Health and Medical Research Council data\(^1\) tells a sorry story:

- That NSW ranks below Victoria, the ACT, South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland in terms of per capita funding received for capacity building people support awards.

- For payments received under the Independent Research Institutes Infrastructure Support Scheme this State receives (in per capita terms) well under the national average and ranks well behind Victoria and Western Australia.

As well as that,

- UniQuest in Queensland employs approximately five times as many staff as in all NSW university commercialisation offices and achieves greater outcomes from less research output.

- And of the $19 million granted to Australian facilities from the world-leading United States National Institutes of Health in 2008/2011 – $9.7 million went to Victoria and only $2.2 million came to NSW.

In all the years that I was shadowing the health portfolio I watched with a growing senses of dismay and alarm at the way in which medical research was being underfunded in this state, the degree to which our best and brightest were not being encouraged and were leaving for greener pastures and the extent to which our patients were missing out on the potential benefits of enhanced medical research and commercial development of our best ideas.

In our election policy Better Patient Care we committed ourselves to the development of a 10 year health and medical research strategic plan that would enable us to develop new treatments, techniques and devices that would drive health reform now and into the future.

We also promised to establish a separate portfolio of Minister of Medical Research to take a leadership role to drive forward our co-ordinated efforts in this field.

On coming to office we acted immediately to do both.

I was honoured to be appointed as the State’s first Minister for Medical research and we immediately commissioned Peter Wills to undertake the strategic review which has brought us together today.

At the same time we also established the Office for Medical Research within the Ministry to make sure we had the people and structures in place to drive forward the decisions which we make in this area.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Peter, the members of his Advisory Committee, the support staff from my Ministry and the hundreds of individuals and organisations who made submissions to the review process for their enormous and valuable contributions.
The government endorses and supports recommendations of the Review, which I believe points us in the right direction for the next ten years.

Forgive the irresistibly tempting pun but—‘where there’s a Wills there’s a way’.

Let me now go to some of the key concepts and recommendations of the Review.

It invites us to commit to action on two broad fronts:

- **Fostering translation and innovation from research** and

- **Building world class research capacity**.

Let me take those two items in reverse.

**Building world class research capacity** is essentially a matter of leadership and encouragement.

Our universities in NSW produce outstanding students and have long and deep traditions of quality research.

Our hospitals are centres of international excellence.

Individual research facilities are well known for the quality of their personnel and their programs.

Individual researchers have produced world-leading best practice – I look for example at just how much researchers in this State have contributed to the worldwide fight against HIV/AIDS with outstanding success.
The role of the government is to make a number of things quite clear – the first of which is the extent to which we value and support the activity of research itself.

Medical research is not some optional extra, some add-on to the suite of health activities supported by the government.

It is an absolutely essential and fundamental building block upon which so much else rests.

Individual researchers and research teams of course need to have access to proper facilities and physical infrastructure in which that research can take place.

It leaves only half the job done if we cannot turn that blue-skies research into practical applications which are available to help improve personal and community health outcomes.

That is where **Fostering translation and innovation from research** comes in.

For inspiration as to what is possible I need only visit any one of our numerous research institutes, drop-in on clinicians working in our hospitals.

Among them I include my conversation with:

- **Professor John Mattick**, inaugural Director of the University of Queensland's Institute of Molecular Bioscience and a pioneer in the analyses of the human genome sequencing and its application to diseases such as cancer and diabetes.
Filling the large shoes of Professor John Shine, when he became their director of this institute, he told me he’d done so because he reckoned it will lead Australia in genome biology, epigenetics and genomic medicine.

His stories of breathtaking cancer treatments based on gene sequencing and his prediction for that it means are an inspiration in themselves.

- Or meeting Dr Catherine Suter, researching Epigenetic gene regulation at the Victor Chang Institut. She fascinated me with her account of how environmental factors can influence health: in particular the potential impact of diet in the pre-pregnant woman on embryonic development, that can lead to obesity and to ill-health effects are not felt until many years later such as diabetes.

- Or Dr William Ritchie head of the Bioinformatics group at the Centenary Institute' who predicts that within a decade or two people will come to people like him for answers to how to treat their diseases because they’ll do the computer analysis of their genome sequence to enable personalised approaches in medicine.

- And, at the Lowy Cancer Research Centre to announce one of the Cancer Institute’s translational Cancer Research grants last year and seeing the The customised robotic technology that allows identification within days instead of years of drugs that can treat aggressive cancer cells in children without destroying surrounding tissue.

These are the heroes I wish to honour – to let them know they are treasured and encouraged as much as any Modern Olympian.

So….

To the result of our consideration of the Strategic Review.
The NSW Government currently allocates some $200 million to medical research and we are committing an investment of an additional $70 million over a four year period to implement the Review recommendations.

Moreover we are doing this in a time of severe budget pressures, fiscal and policy restraint and necessary, often painful, expenditure savings in other areas. This indicates our priorities as a Government.

Among that $70 million commitment I draw attention particularly to the following:

• Annualising an additional $10 million to the base funding of the Medical Research Support Programme to bring the total to $37.3 million per annum

• An investment of $5 million annually to a Medical Devices Seeding Fund which will encourage and promote investment in one of our existing areas of key strengths and international expertise – the design and development of medical devices

• Establishing a Research Capacity Building Programme designed specifically to attract and support elite researchers to NSW with an emphasis on another of our strengths – bioinformatics

• Providing $800,000 annually to support eight research hubs

• Providing $800,000 annually for support of research networks and establishing a clinical trial support team within the Office of Medical Research
• Partnering with the NH&MRC to establish a Partnership Centre in ‘Systems Perspectives on the Prevention of Lifestyle-Related Chronic Health Problems’

• Establishing a Chair in Cancer Prevention

• The development of a vision for bio-banking and a policy framework to improve and enhance investment in this important research infrastructure which, I hope, will also link in with the work we are doing to improve organ and tissue donation rates.

As you know I have been keen to drive an agenda of devolution within NSW Health.

Our approach to funding and support of medical research – which I should note we are rebranding as Health and Medical Research to better reflect the continuum of necessary activity – will reflect this.

I expect the individual Local Health Districts to take up the opportunities to expand their own research activities and infrastructures. And, although not mentioned specifically in the Review, I extend this invitation to the Specialist Health Networks where appropriate.

The Review makes it clear that the Ministry, together with the Agency for Clinical Innovation and the Clinical Excellence Commission have a role to support LHDs in the development of their own committees to support local research and this is something I endorse with enthusiasm. Neither the mantra nor the fear that bigger is always better will be allowed to stifle local initiative.

Existing organisations such as the Cancer Institute are of course also included in this initiative.
As evidence the NSW Government’s commitment to encouraging and rewarding devolved initiatives, the Ministry is also facilitating individual hospitals access to the national Medical Research Commercialisation Fund.

Commercialisation activities are not only being encouraged, they will be actively supported with many of the initiatives I have announced and further underpinned by a commitment to help strengthen the IP capacity of the system as a whole.

Another activity I am keen to encourage is one which does not involve a great deal of expenditure – just a large amount of leadership – namely to improve the administration of NSW health research.

I have asked that the Director General to give priority to issues identified by the Review, such as excessive delays in research ethics and site authorisation processes and inconsistencies across the system, which are unnecessarily inhibiting or delaying worthwhile research.

Our new medical research strategy compliments all the elements of our CORE values.

- Collaboration will be promoted across hubs and networks as the commonality of research priorities emerges.

- Openness and transparency about funding will be enhanced and greater accountability brought into the system as clear guidelines for grants are understood and an enhanced system of public reporting to the Office of Medical Research and the Ministry is established. There will be no more secrecy about who gets what, or what they do with the public money invested in them.
• Respect for the work of our medical researchers and those who support them and for the entrepreneurs and commercialisation agents who help bring their products to market for the enhancement of health outcomes will be enhanced.

• Empowerment of LHDs, Specialist Networks, research institutes and individual researchers to contest funding and be supported in their endeavours will benefit the entire health system.

The decisions which we have made in response to this Review will start the process of putting New South Wales back where it ought to be in terms of national and international leadership in the field of medical research and the transitional support for turning great research into practical outcomes.

I want this State to be, once again, a world leader, to punch above its weight and to bring home the ‘gold, gold gold’.

I want to direct my final remarks to those of you directly involved in health and medical research.

I believe that for far too long you have been marginalised from the broader developments in the health sector; your role has been grossly underestimated and under-valued and your individual and collective contributions have been unrecognised and unappreciated.

I hope that that era is now passed and that, just as I as Minister for Medical Research and this Government have given medical research such a high priority, there will be a greater understanding in the wider community of the debt we owe you now and in the future.

Nobel prizewinner in physics, Neils Bohr and baseballer extraordinaire, Yogi Berra are both attributed with the saying that it is difficult to make predictions,
especially about the future, but let me venture into that dangerous territory and say that I believe that the findings and outcomes of medical research in the next ten years, in this State and elsewhere, will lead us into territory and opportunities that none of us can now even start to imagine.

The extent to which the health and medical challenges which face us today will be solved more quickly than we ever dreamed is unknown – but we do know that none of it will take place without a firm grounding in quality research.

The key as Louis Pasteur said is to remember that “fortune favours the mind prepared.”

I am determined that we will be prepared!