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Protect Health and Medical Research in Australia through the COVID-19 crisis

The current pandemic is changing significant aspects of our life and work which will have a profound impact for years to come. Our thoughts are with those who are affected worldwide and our health and medical colleagues working tirelessly on the front-line.

We welcome the Government's substantial efforts to steer the economy through these difficult times to ensure Australia emerges ready for a strong recovery.

President of the Australian Society for Medical Research, A/Professor Christoph Hagemeyer, said in Melbourne today *"Our world-leading health and medical researchers have been mobilised to develop novel coronavirus vaccines, find treatment options for COVID-19 and accelerate our testing capabilities. However, the requirement for physical distancing and working from home has resulted in the deceleration or interruption of most other lab-based and clinical research projects, many of which will not be completed without additional support."*

This must be addressed immediately so that researchers can continue their critical health- and economy-boosting work when the pandemic finally abates, and we enter an era where health and medical research will be more important than ever.

As Australia's peak body representing the health and medical research sector, we call on the government to provide a one-off crisis intervention of \$400M to the NHMRC to enable a 6-month extension to currently-funded research grants. This will help to retain the current workforce and provide sufficient opportunity for the very best research (as determined previously by peer review) to deliver the intended optimal outcomes for the nation.

A/Prof Hagemeyer said, *"Without this additional support, many projects currently funded by the NHMRC will be forced to wind down only partly completed, compromising future health impacts and return on investment. This one-off investment will ensure the stability of the respective health and medical research workforce and help to reinforce these grants that have been funded by the NHMRC. After a 20% workforce loss in recent years due to stagnating NHMRC funding, the Australian health and medical research sector can ill afford to lose more highly skilled researchers to the current crisis and reduce our capacity to discover important new mechanisms, treatments, diagnostics and vaccines."*

The health and medical research sector will be critically important in the recovery phase of this pandemic, not only by creating new knowledge, but also through one of the highest returns on investment of all industries. Australia needs a well-supported world-class health and medical sector now more than ever.

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