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Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)  

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Peter J Wills, AC  
Review Chair  
NSW Health and Medical Research Strategic Review  
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Dear Peter,

NSW Health and Medical Research Strategic Review

The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the initial consultation by the NSW Health and Medical Research Review. We commend the Minister for Health and Medical Research in NSW for prioritizing this important and timely review and for committing to developing a long-term strategic approach to ensure the vitality of the sector in NSW for the next decade. A well crafted strategy is critical to positioning NSW to realising its important contributions to the sector nationally and internationally.

Our initial response to the Review is intentionally high-level and aims to convey our concerns with and aspirations for health and medical research in NSW from the perspective of a large, research-intensive, global university. It has been formulated in consultation with our Health Faculties. We will extend our consultations to include the views of our affiliated medical research institutes and hospitals when preparing further submissions to your Review and to the Commonwealth’s Butler Review of Health and Medical Research in Australia.

We understand your initial consultation casts a broad net to capture the diversity of opinion and concerns of individual stakeholders across the health and medical research sector. To assist you we have promoted the Review throughout the university and among our affiliates to encourage our researchers, clinicians and others with an interest, to provide feedback in their individual capacities through your on-line survey.

We note our support of the general tenor of Professor Mike Calford’s initial submission to the Review on behalf of the NSW Deputy and Pro-Vice-Chancellors (Research) Committee.

At this stage of the consultation we believe the following issues are key to an adequate response to the terms of reference, and organise them under the four themes, or objectives, suggested in the survey.
1. **To position NSW as an important contributor to health and medical research on the international stage**

This University contributes substantially to the international performance of NSW in the sector. More than 80% of NSW health and medical research is undertaken through in NSW universities, facilitated by our historic relationships with associated Medical Research Institutes and hospitals. In the 2010 Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) evaluation this university’s performance was “well above world standard” (rating 5) in five medical and health related fields of research (FOR), and “above world standard” (rating 4) in nine.

However this objective implies that the Review will analyse the capacity, resource utilisation, and policy drivers affecting the sector as a whole and relate it to the State’s performance against international benchmarks. The University endorses this aspiration. Other States have demonstrated the value of a long-term, state-wide approach to health and medical research capacity, including strategic investment, and have reaped the benefits.

Possibly the biggest single factor in achieving this objective will be the extent to which the research infrastructure that NSW researchers rely on is sustained and developed rationally, and to a standard which is nationally and internationally competitive. Therefore we encourage policies that will enable NSW researchers to compete effectively for Commonwealth infrastructure funds, and for improved NSW programs for infrastructure support of health and medical research. Such policies would also ensure maximum leveraging of investment across levels of government, as well as from the philanthropic sector.

The development of Commonwealth and State health reform agendas poses a particular challenge, notably that of potential inconsistency between them. However this process has the potential to integrate both research and teaching more firmly into health systems and policy and therefore presents an opportunity for NSW to get the settings right for its own health research effort. It is also essential that NSW encourages the Commonwealth to better coordinate administration and policy in health and higher education.

2. **To think and act as one in the health and medical research sector**

The sector’s health facilities, universities and research institutes are critically interdependent and each of these stakeholders has a unique and valuable role to play. However current policy and funding drivers do not encourage integrated research development and healthy competition, rather they too often have led to fragmentation. This outcome is especially problematic because strong linkages between basic research, typically strongest in the universities and institutes, and clinical practice, centred within the hospital environment, are essential to all phases of medical and health-related research; discovery, innovation and most importantly to research translation for patient benefit.

Research and teaching are increasingly inter-disciplinary and inter-professional endeavours in which participation by the health care workforce is fundamental. Our health faculties include large numbers of clinicians whose input to clinical research and to teaching is often carried out in great tension with the pressures of service delivery.
We support exploration of an advanced health centre (AHC) model, as is leading international practice, which brings universities, hospitals, research institutes, primary care and other providers together to work in collaboration to integrate preventative health strategies, primary and clinical care, education and research. These AHCs provide a framework in which diverse roles can be better aligned and more effectively resourced. For example the costs of teaching, training and research undertaken in public hospitals and MRIs could be identified, shared and transparently funded.

The State of NSW boasts a history of strong and successful relationships between MRIs, hospitals and universities and it important to ensure porosity in the boundaries between these entities to make it easy to collaborate. There is a significant danger in the current climate that silos in government will continue to place more emphasis on the boundaries between the entities than on recognizing the benefits and gains of free and full collaboration between them. To achieve this outcome, there must be mutual recognition and respect for the different primary roles played by universities, MRIs and hospitals with the understanding that research is core to success in each case, and funding that supports the real cost of research.

3. **To work to the strengths of the NSW health and medical research sector**

The University and its health faculties have recognised that our research can be effectively developed through identification of areas of existing strength and support such an approach for the sector. We do note that strength in research can be implicit and dispersed and may require specific incentives to enable researchers to self-identify as collectives, consolidate their efforts and realise their potential, especially across disciplinary and institutional boundaries.

We also caution that a sole focus on existing strength will lead to neglect of strategically important gaps. We therefore encourage measures, based on evidence, to address areas of weakness in NSW research capacity that are nonetheless strategically important to have in our portfolio.

4. **To increase health outcomes and value provided by the NSW health and medical research sector**

The sector delivers value to NSW principally through improved health and these benefits are realised through several mechanisms:

- Strong basic research that is resourced adequately in a sustainable framework provides the foundation for discovery and leads to improved health outcomes. This pathway has never been more important as we enter the era wherein the capability is evolving to identify the mechanisms of disease that apply in individual patients – so-called personalised medicine.
- It is the knowledge base derived from our own patients, population and health system through embedded clinical, public health, health services and health policy research that ensures relevance of what we do. These linkages provide the benefits of research to the people of NSW wherever the research has been done.
• Research awareness and research participation by patients and professionals in our health system is a powerful guarantee of continuous improvement in the quality and efficiency of health care. The impact of such engagement cannot be over-emphasized.

Important to all of these mechanisms is the strong connection between research and patient care that is essential to attracting and retaining the best minds and health care practitioners in NSW. The University plays vital roles in all of these domains, both directly and through its teaching and training, and encourages the Review to address them in depth.

It is clear that clinical trials will require greater infrastructure support if our NSW patients are to have an opportunity to continue to participate in world class clinical trials. These trials can provide patients with opportunities to have access to new generation technology, the trials help train clinicians in the application of new treatments, and if such treatments are then proven and approved, we already have a workforce able to deliver latest treatment advance. We therefore recommend that facilitating clinical trials in our teaching hospitals should be a priority for future research investment.

We also are strongly focussed on improved translation of our research to new products and processes. Here we support reforms to encourage smoother partnership between universities, medical research institutes and health facilities. Such an outcome would be supported by the development of policies and template agreements with respect to the management and ownership of intellectual property. To facilitate the translation of intellectual property into outcomes consideration should be given to the State Government’s role in attracting investment for commercialisation to NSW.

Conclusion and next steps

The University welcomes the State Government’s commitment to develop a vision for the future of health in NSW, as expressed in the above themes, and is keen to be part of the process. We look forward to working closely with you as the Review matures, and will provide more detailed commentary and analysis to submission rounds 2 & 3. We are very keen to support and actively participate in the proposed roundtables and interviews.

We would particularly value any opportunity for you, the NSW Chief Scientist and other members of the panel as appropriate, to visit the University to meet face-to-face with key people on campus, in our associated teaching hospitals and affiliated medical research institutes.

Yours sincerely

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Professor Jill Trewhella
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)