The National Health and Medical Research Council is investing in the future of Australian health with a focus on sustainable and strategic support for health and medical research.

As featured in The CEO Magazine
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Fastway Couriers’ Richard Thame • Fitness First’s Andy Cosslett • Ticketmaster’s Maria O’Connor

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Warwick Anderson, CEO of NHMRC, spoke to The CEO Magazine about the important role NHMRC plays and how it is shaping the future health and wealth of Australia.

The CEO Magazine: Can you give our readers an overview of your professional background leading up to and including your current position?

Warwick: I’m a researcher in a bureaucratic role. I was a full-time medical researcher and then an academic and researcher at Monash University. I had my own large research team before I dropped into the Australian public service and had to learn to be a senior bureaucrat while on the job. Fortunately, I had some great help from my senior colleagues over in the Department of Health to keep me on the straight and narrow. I’ve been in this job now for almost eight years.

I think to do this job, or the equivalent at the Australian Research Council, the experience of being a researcher helps you frame questions in a way that they can be properly investigated, and helps you understand the community that you’re working with.

In order to make the NHMRC work and to get through our work each year, we enlist thousands of researchers to help us with expert review of the thousands of grant applications we receive. That’s basically a volunteer process by the research community, and, although I have 200 staff, mainly here in Canberra and a small number in Melbourne, we rely on these researchers each year to help us do our work. They write thousands of assessments of each other’s work, and around 900 or 1,000 serve on our various peer review panels.

What were the challenges for you moving from academia to public administration?

There are a lot of differences between public service and academia. For instance, in the public service, you have line management control over people, so, unlike academics, you can instruct staff to do something and deliver it. Instructing an academic is sometimes an impossible task! In academia, you need to take people along with you and everybody is their own boss, while in the public service there are really excellent processes in place that result in a great deal of efficiency.

Another difference is the superb help you receive in the Australian public service. If you’re tackling something for the first time, there are other senior executives who are happy to give advice. The public service is a very mutually supportive system, which I’ve found to be exceptionally important.

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Our medical researcher cohort in Australia is just terrific. We are also building national wealth on the basis of medical research. It's about trying to find treatments and cures for terrible illnesses that we still suffer from, but we also need to build some national wealth. We're all proud of CSL, Cochlear, ResMed, and Mesoblast, and all the small biotechs that are gradually becoming bigger.

As we build more and more medtech and biotech industries, we want to make sure that there's not just good jobs and successful companies paying taxes but that we've got a good export industry as well. The category of medicinals and pharmaceuticals is currently our largest manufactured export sector. We have great research, and it's turning up new treatments, cures, and preventive techniques.

Throughout your time with the NHMRC, what have been the greatest challenges?

The first challenge I had was to make sure the organisation was looking outward. We have a very important role in Australia's health, and I felt when I took over the organisation that it was a bit inward-looking. Engagement with the health system, clinical practitioners, state and territory health departments, and the private sector was one of the biggest challenges. It doesn't necessarily come automatically to the public service to do that. We set up advisory panels and ways of communication around that.

Another challenge was that we really didn't have people who came from research working in the NHMRC, apart from me and one other senior person. There was a bit of a gap in knowledge. I set on a recruitment process to recruit people who had been researchers themselves to come and work for us. Some of the public service staff, who are absolutely essential to making an organisation like the NHMRC work well, were a bit suspicious of what I was trying to do and felt a bit undervalued. It has been a continuing issue with staff to understand the new ethos and priorities, but I think things have worked out really well because you absolutely need both high-quality public servants and people who understand the research community.

What leadership role does NHMRC play in Australian health and medical research?

We are the big body in health and medical research. There are other bodies and charities who fund research, but because we, by a significant margin, have the largest fund around and are the Commonwealth Government's main funder, what we do and the priorities we set have a ripple effect. We fund the creation of new knowledge. We really don't know

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- Warwick Anderson

Your organisation can have an impact on child health.

As Australia’s leading paediatric research institute, recognised globally for research excellence, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute is dedicated to finding treatments and cures for debilitating illnesses that affect children here and around the world.

Murdoch Children’s Research Institute continues to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with a range of businesses across corporate Australia. The opportunities for corporate involvement are diverse. From building employee engagement, enhancing your brand profile or engaging stakeholders, we build tailored programs to meet the business and brand objectives of our partner organisation.

To enquire about a tailored program for your organisation, contact Matthew Hannan, Senior Manager Corporate and Community Engagement on (03) 9341 6449 matthew.hannan@mcrl.edu.au

The Group of Eight Universities
Collaborating to make Australia better

• vaccines such as the human papilloma virus vaccine helping to prevent cancers
• medical devices such as cochlear implants helping deaf people hear
• research outcomes controlling inflammatory diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis
• research fighting malaria and other infectious diseases
• world-ranked discoveries in immunology, preventative medicine, and obesity.

Our discoveries create impressive commercial opportunities as well as broader economic and humanitarian returns:

- We produce two-thirds of Australian-trained medical practitioners.
- We perform more than 60 per cent of National Health and Medical Research Council funded research.
- We work from bench top to bedside, from fundamental discovery to clinical practice.
Investing in the next decades of discoveries

"With a history of collaborating to help save lives commencing almost 100 years ago in 1916, we are proud to support our longstanding partner with two Centenary Fellowships in the certain knowledge that an investment in talent today will result in life-saving discoveries in the future."

Dr Andrew Cuthbertson
Director of R&D and Chief Scientist
CSL Limited

In 2015, Australia’s longest-serving medical research institute, the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, commemorates 100 years of discoveries for humanity. Institute discoveries have improved treatments for 20 million cancer patients, protected populations from flu, and led to clinical trials of new vaccines and cancer drugs.

Future discoveries depend on supporting the best and brightest young scientists to continue tackling some of the most complex and challenging diseases facing humankind.

To discuss a partnership with the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, contact the office of the director on +61 3 9345 2962.

The sustainability of the health system has been an important public issue for a long time, ever since the first intergenerational report in 2002. I believe very strongly that governments and private insurers can use research more successfully in the future by disinvesting their funds in programs where the evidence shows programs are ineffective.

"It is a real privilege to work with the NHMRC. As reviewers we get to see and consider the best medical research in Australia and as recipients of NHMRC funds we are constantly pushed to sharpen our thinking and ideas."
- Professor Angel Lopez, Co-Director of the Centre for Cancer Biology, University of South Australia

NHMRC provides grant funding to more than 100 institutions, including universities, hospitals, and medical research institutes. More than 80 per cent of funding goes to the top 20 institutions. These include the Group of Eight universities and four or five large medical research institutes. There is, however, a long tail with many dozens of other universities and small institutes.

We work closely with the Group of Eight universities, especially when we are developing policy that may affect universities.

The Group of Eight dominate the university space as they are universities with the most well-established medical schools. We are also increasing our co-funding arrangements with state and territory governments as well as NGOs. We play a very active role in collaborating with international funding agencies. That’s a lot of partnership and engagement.

What does the future hold for the NHMRC?

We’ve been around for almost 80 years, so I hope we’re a very trusted part of the Australian health scene. It is increasingly important both to make sure patients get the best care and to make sure that the cost of that care is sustainable, and that there is a body like the NHMRC. If we’re going to have a sustainable health system in the future, we cannot ask the taxpayer to pay for things that aren’t effective. Whether a drug, device, intervention of preventative measure is effective or not is determined by medical research. This is one of NHMRC’s responsibilities—to fund the research and promote its uptake into the system.

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The Centre for Cancer Biology is poised to significantly grow and expand its ground-breaking research through a new alliance with the University of South Australia. The development of the new multimillion dollar health precinct with contributions from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and from both State and Federal governments will drive the development of innovative and personalised therapies for cancers such as leukaemia, breast and colon cancers, that can make a real difference to patient outcomes.

For more information please visit centreforcancerbiology.org.au

Professors Sharad Kumar and Angel Lopez Co-Directors of the Centre for Cancer Biology and Professor David Lloyd, Vice Chancellor and President, University of South Australia.