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Sent via email: HMRconsultations@health.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Discussion Paper on 'Improving alignment and coordination between the Medical Research Future Fund and NHMRC's Medical Research Endowment Account'

Stroke Foundation is a national charity that partners with the community to prevent stroke, save lives and enhance recovery. We do this through raising awareness, facilitating research, and supporting survivors of stroke. Stroke Foundation is dedicated to empowering health professionals to deliver high quality best-practice care to stroke patients. We advocate for better systems, processes, and resources to help health professionals deliver world class stroke care.

As the voice of stroke in Australia, Stroke Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the Discussion Paper on 'Improving alignment and coordination between the Medical Research Future Fund and NHMRC's Medical Research Endowment Account'.

Stroke Foundation strongly supports the Federal Government's commitment to strengthening Australia's health and medical research system by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the funding system, ensuring its investment in research maximises outcomes for the Australian community.

Stroke Foundation can see the benefits of delivering a single cohesive grant program, and supports the implementation of 'Model 3 – Merge the two funds with new governance arrangements'. This model makes financial sense, and would reduce both applicant and reviewer workloads. Importantly however, it is critical any cost savings achieved as a consequence of merging the two funds are redirected back into the research funding pool. There is a clear need for the Australian Government to increase its investment in research. Australia's total spending on research and development as a percentage of GDP in 2019 was 1.8 percent, compared with the OECD average of 2.5 percent.¹

Regardless of which of the three proposed models is chosen for implementation, it is important the Australian Government is able to consider and address the issues detailed below.

A larger emphasis on addressing areas with the greatest disease burden and unmet research need

In 2020, 27,428 Australians experienced stroke for the first time, and there were more than 445,000 survivors of stroke living in our community - many with an ongoing disability.² Unless action is taken, it is estimated by 2050, Australians will experience an additional 23,000 new strokes annually, and there will be an additional 374,000 survivors of stroke living in the community.²

Stroke has long been recognised as one of Australia's most costly disease groups. In 2020, it is estimated the economic impact of stroke in Australia was \$6.2 billion in direct financial costs and a further \$26 billion in lost wellbeing.³

Stroke has been a national health priority in Australia since 1996. In addition, Australia is home to some of the leading minds in stroke research. Importantly, despite the shocking statistics and devastating impact of stroke on the Australian community, stroke-related research continues to be under-represented in funding support.⁴ For example, between 2000 and 2020, funding awarded for stroke research by the NHMRC equated to \$376 million, representing 2.9 percent of the total investment in medical research.⁴

Since the MRFF began disbursing funds in 2017, Australian stroke researchers have been awarded funding for a wide range of innovative research projects, with Stroke Foundation partnering with, or supporting researchers on a number of these world-leading initiatives, including:

- *The 'Love Your Brain: A stroke prevention digital platform' project (\$945,000 awarded under the MRFF Cardiovascular Health Mission)*
- *The 'Stroke Golden Hour' project (\$40 million awarded under the MRFF Frontier Health and Medical Research Initiative)*
- *The 'Australian Paediatric Acute Code Stroke (PACS)' study (\$4 million awarded under the MRFF Cardiovascular Health Mission)*
- *The 'Return to life, return to work' clinical research grants (\$2 million awarded under the MRFF Emerging Priorities and Consumer Driven Research Initiative)*
- *The 'Living stroke guidelines' pilot (\$1.5 million awarded under the MRFF)*

Importantly, one of the key funding principles of the MRFF is that 'Disbursement from the MRFF will fund specific health issue initiatives assessed on scientific rigour, where there is both burden and unmet research need'. In addition, a notable difference between the NHMRC and MRFF funding schemes is that MRFF grants are generally targeted within funding initiatives. For example, the current \$23 million call for cardiovascular and stroke research under the MRFF Cardiovascular Health Mission – 2023 Cardiovascular Health Grant Opportunity.

Moving forward, it is critical that targeted, disease-based funding continues to be provided through the MRFF, and the NHMRC puts a larger emphasis on addressing areas with the greatest disease burden and unmet research need when awarding funding for research.

Greater funding opportunities for early and mid-career researchers

Over the last 10 years, the funded rate for the NHMRC's various grant schemes has fallen from approximately 20 percent, to about 15 percent in 2022.⁵ Over the same period of time, the amount of NHMRC funding available for researchers in inflation-adjusted and per capita terms has fallen, as funding levels have remained steady and both prices and population have increased. As a consequence, growing numbers of researchers are competing for a shrinking pool of real NHMRC funding. This has impacted early and mid-career researchers disproportionately. If we take the example of the NHMRC's Ideas Grant Program, which is open to researchers at all career stages, in 2022 only 11 percent of applications submitted to this Program were funded, and of these, only 15 percent were awarded to early and mid-career researchers.⁶ Similarly, while there are dedicated funding provisions for early and mid-career researchers through the MRFF, these are inadequate, with the 2021 MRFF early and mid-career researcher funding round having the lowest success rate among all MRFF funding opportunities between 2020 and 2022 (5.4 percent, with 23 of 423 applications funded).

A high-performing, sustainable health and medical research sector in Australia is dependent on its ability to attract and retain talented researchers, through world-class infrastructure and facilities, cutting edge research programs and strong research funding. This critical mass of research expertise in turn facilitates the collaborative, interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research required to solve many of today's complex health problems.

Targeted investment by the Australian Government in dedicated grant schemes for early and mid-career researchers is needed to ensure we are able to retain our future world-class research leaders, who will be critical to Australia's ability to respond to health challenges in the years to come.

Research is central to Stroke Foundation's mission to prevent stroke, save lives and enhance recovery. By supporting research, we are fostering the current and next generation of leaders who will pave the way forward to the next innovation in stroke prevention, treatment and care. As a small organisation with an ambitious vision, we play a vital role at the start of the research pipeline. Stroke Foundation's Research Program funds annual research grants to promote stroke research capacity and generate new stroke knowledge. Since the Program's inception in 2008, more than \$6 million in research grants has been awarded to more than 200 researchers, thanks to the generosity of our donors.

As part of our Research Program, Stroke Foundation provides seed grants to support early and mid-career researchers to test their ideas, gain experience in leading a small project and tackle evidence and implementation gaps in stroke prevention, treatment and recovery.

Over the past two decades, high-quality research has led to improved diagnosis of, and new treatments for stroke. We are proud to say many of these ground-breaking medical advances have been Australian led, made possible by the many donors who have generously supported Stroke Foundation's Research Program. For example, in 2012, Stroke Foundation provided an Early Career Fellowship Grant to now Professor Bruce Campbell. This grant, partnered with project funding from the Heart Foundation, NHMRC and The Royal Melbourne Hospital Foundation, supported the Endovascular Therapy for Ischaemic Stroke with Perfusion-Imaging Studies (EXTEND-IA) study, which investigated the use of clot removal in

stroke patients with large clots coupled with clot dissolving treatment. The results of this landmark study have changed clinical practice in Australia and worldwide.

Greater consumer participation in health and medical research

The importance of meaningful consumer participation in the research process is now well recognised, and incorporating the lived experience is key to impactful research. Health and medical research in Australia is largely funded from the public purse, therefore from an ethical standpoint, it is critical researchers ensure their studies reflect the priorities, needs and preferences of consumers, who are the end-users of this research.

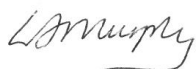
Consumers are able to contribute to research in a variety of ways, including by guiding and providing input to researchers to influence decisions about research priorities and how research is conducted, as well as about policy and practice. Importantly, the involvement of those with a lived experience ensures research outcomes are relevant to the needs of the community, which facilitates the translation of research into practice.

Since the establishment of the MRFF, many more opportunities for consumer involvement and engagement in health and medical research have opened up. We strongly encourage the Australian Government to further strengthen the consumer focus of the MRFF, as well as ensure there are more opportunities for consumer voices to shape NHMRC-funded research projects.

Survivors of stroke, families, carers and the community are central to stroke research. We know that when researchers and people with lived experience of stroke work together, the quality of research is better and it is more impactful. People living with stroke are uniquely placed to help guide researchers with many aspects of their work, including study design. Lived experience of stroke is the cornerstone of Stroke Foundation's work, especially its Research Program. At each stage of the Program we listen to, involve, and engage with members of our stroke community, to ensure our research priorities address the areas that matter most to them.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Discussion Paper on 'Improving alignment and coordination between the Medical Research Future Fund and NHMRC's Medical Research Endowment Account'.

Yours sincerely



Dr Lisa Murphy
Chief Executive Officer
Stroke Foundation



Professor Coralie English
Chair, Research Advisory Committee
Stroke Foundation

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