



the  
**Lowitja**  
Institute

Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Health Research

Professor Ann Kelso, AO  
Chief Executive Officer  
National Health and Medical Research Council  
GPO Box 1421  
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Professor Kelso,

### **Structural Review of NHMRC's Grant Program**

The Lowitja Institute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Structural Review of NHMRC's Grant Program.

The Lowitja Institute is the national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, named in honour of its Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, AC CBE DSG. It is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high impact quality research, knowledge translation, and by supporting a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers. Established in January 2010, the Lowitja Institute operates on key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing, and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact.

#### *Our Key Principles*

The Lowitja Institute has identified five key principles that guide and underpin our approach to research:

- Beneficence – to act for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the conduct of our research
- Leadership by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Engagement of research end users (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, policymakers, other potential research users)
- Development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research workforce, and
- Measurement of impact in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health.

More information regarding the Lowitja Institute can be found at our website on [www.lowitja.org.au](http://www.lowitja.org.au).

We provide the following in response to the Structural Review of NHMRC's Grant Program Consultation Paper, July 2016.

## ***Research for Impact***

Although all three Alternative Models outlined in the Consultation Paper are likely to achieve efficiencies in the research application process, the Lowitja Institute would like to see further emphasis placed on improving the value of research for health and wellbeing.

In developing new ways to ensure the Medical Research Endowment Fund is used most effectively for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the Lowitja Institute believes we must build in ways to improve and assess the value or impact of research. This reinforces the principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, commencing with research users and their information needs, whether existing knowledge is sufficient or new research is required, and the costs and benefits of research. For research to have a lasting and effective impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, we believe it must:

- engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as decision makers, leaders, researchers and participants
- be a priority for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as opposed to investigator-driven priority
- address a genuine research gap, be appropriate to the research context and research question
- combine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge with rigorous Western approaches and be built on ethical decision-making
- facilitate translation of research knowledge and evidence into policy and practice and
- represent value for money.

To this end, the Lowitja Institute is nearing completion of a tool to measure impact of health research for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**Recommendation:** That the Structural Review take into consideration of the principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership of research and decisions regarding research priorities, impact and benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## ***Collaboration with all end-users***

Alternative Model 1 has some emphasis on collaboration, however the emphasis appears to be on collaboration between researchers. In undertaking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, the Lowitja Institute emphasises a wider collaboration, one incorporating all end users of research evidence, comprising researchers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and other users. We would encourage such cross-collaboration for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research funded by the NHMRC.

**Recommendation:** That the Structural Review take into consideration the importance of all end-users of research evidence.

### **Research Translation**

Alternative Model 3 clearly addresses research translation, however, Alternative Models 1 and 2 do not appear to do so.

The Lowitja Institute believes that translation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research must be incorporated from project design stage and should consider factors such as project partners/collaborations, knowledge mobilisation, project champions as well as impact and evaluation. At the same time, research translation should take into account the potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement, leadership and capacity development.

The Lowitja Institute would be pleased to discuss our approach to research translation and knowledge exchange with the NHMRC.

**Recommendation:** That the Structural Review consider the important role of research translation and knowledge exchange in the final funding model.

### **National approach to development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research Workforce**

The Lowitja Institute acknowledges and supports the allocation and expenditure of least 5% of the Medical Research Endowment Account to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.

In terms of capacity building, we would like to see a similar target, and reporting thereof, in relation to the allocation of funds awarded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. Further consideration would need to be given to the measurement of such a target, taking into account the number of Chief Investigators, Assistant Investigators, early and mid-career researchers, and research assistants in any funded project. Such a measure would support a national commitment to the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research workforce. It also brings relevant expertise and supports a level of cultural competence in this research endeavour.

**Recommendation:** That the Structural Review consider developing a target to measure the allocation of research funds that are granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

We would welcome the opportunity to be of further assistance to this review, should it be required. The contact person for this work is Ms Mary Guthrie, Manager, Knowledge Translation. Mary can be contacted on 03 8341 5504, or email [mary.guthrie@lowitja.org.au](mailto:mary.guthrie@lowitja.org.au).

Yours sincerely



Romlie Mokak  
Chief Executive Officer