

12 May 2020

Dr Matthew Butlin
Presiding Commissioner
South Australian Productivity Commission

Via: <https://www.sapc.sa.gov.au/inquiries/inquiries/health-and-medical-research/issues-paper>

Health and Medical Research Inquiry

I refer to the recently published Terms of Reference for the SA Productivity Commission inquiry into Health and Medical Research (HMR).

As a significant funder of cancer research in this state through the Cancer Council Beat Cancer Project, Cancer Council SA is keen to contribute to your inquiry through this submission.

Cancer Council Beat Cancer Project

Cancer Council's Beat Cancer Project has one vision – to bring us closer than ever to a future without cancer, and is based on the [South Australian Cancer Research Strategy](#) developed in 2016. The Strategy was developed in response to a need to ensure that the South Australian cancer research enterprise continues to grow its strong foundations and competitiveness, and is well placed to adapt to and take advantage of the growing health and medical research and health services infrastructure in South Australia.

Since 2011, Cancer Council SA has partnered with SA Health, SAHMRI and the SA Universities to fund the Beat Cancer Project. Thanks to this collaboration and the generous donations from the community, in the past eight years we have been able to contribute over \$15 million towards ground-breaking research initiatives (including project grants, fellowships, scholarships, and infrastructure and travel grants).

The research projects funded by the Beat Cancer Project cover a broad spectrum of cancer-related topics from basic science and biomedical research, through to clinical, population health and health services research. This research is being conducted in some of the most common cancers affecting South Australians, including bowel, breast and skin cancers.

The problem

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The South Australian Government's current investment in HMR is not structured by a funding framework or strategy that is focussed specifically on supporting the growth of HMR in the state. The Commission would like to understand issues in assessing HMR performance in South Australia, particularly in relation to identifying measures and data sources. It recognises four specific types of impact: knowledge, health, economic and social.

3.1 Policy environment

The processes for ethics and governance approval have an adverse effect on the ability of South Australian researchers to secure Australian Government funding. There are two recent examples where Cancer Council SA researchers have experienced extensive delays in obtaining full ethics approval from a local health network. One approval, with a delay of more than 10 months, was sought for a negligible/low-risk single-site study. The delay resulted in the pilot project having to be extended twice, which had the knock-on effect of delaying application for subsequent NHMRC funding. Another substantially delayed approval was for a small multi-site low-risk study, which already had approval from other HRECs, including other cancer institutions and LHNs, and the Aboriginal Health Council of SA (AHCSA).

Cancer Council SA considers that a simplified state-wide approach to ethics and governance approval could minimise inconsistencies and process duplications across multiple organisations. This would improve productivity and opportunities for researchers to attract Australian Government funding to the state.

These issues correspond with the 2018 Jim Birch *Review of Research Governance in the Department for Health and Wellbeing (SA) and related LHNs*, which found variations between LHNs in their approaches and unnecessary delays in approval, particularly in low-risk applications. This made it likely that applicants would drift to other sites where approval can be obtained more quickly. The review recommended a consistent, streamlined, state-wide approach to ethics approval for all LHN ethics committees to assess low, medium and high-risk applications (<https://healthtranslationsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Attachment-1-Research-Governance-Review.pdf>).

Note that the extent to which the Department for Health and Wellbeing has addressed the findings of the Birch Review is not broadly apparent at this time.

5.2 Access to data

Cancer Council SA has not found the current regulatory environment to be conducive to effective data generation and sharing. While access to public hospital clinical data is generally

acceptable, there is currently no access to private hospital data. This clearly limits the state's ability to effectively evaluate health services and outcomes, and to inform policy. It also limits the effectiveness of health and medical research that relies on data linkage.

Cancer Council SA considers that there are many issues around data quality and completeness for vulnerable and hard to reach South Australian populations, where health inequalities are common. These include rural and remote residents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and the aged. These populations are considered particularly vulnerable groups in terms of cancer screening, prevalence and treatment. This lack of data makes it exceedingly difficult to develop and evaluate health services, outcomes, and policy.

5.5 Funding

The SA Government provides no real support to help researchers access Australian Government funding and Cancer Council SA has experienced no direct assistance in this regard. However, the success of the Beat Cancer Project, which is co-funded by the SA Government, provided a sound basis and research track record that was instrumental in Cancer Council SA successfully attracting a Medical Research Future Fund Accelerated Research Grant for the Beat Cancer Project in 2019. The Victorian model illustrates how state governments can support researchers to successfully bid for federal funds, with Victorian cancer researchers attracting around half of the national funding for research in cancer.

Summary

In addressing the Commission's information requests more generally, we refer to the South Australian Cancer Research Strategy and provide the latest the Beat Cancer Project progress report, as at 30 June 2019. Together, these provide evidence of how the strategy has addressed workforce, access to data, infrastructure collaboration, funding, translation and clinical trials.

Yours sincerely



Lincoln Size
Chief Executive

Att: Beat Cancer Project Annual Report Year 3