



SUBMISSION FORM AND TEMPLATE FOR COMMENTS

Consultation Paper on NHMRC's Research Fellowships Scheme – 25 May 2009

Please complete the form below and attach it to your comments. Comments that do not have this submission form attached will not be accepted.

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An individual An organisation

2. Contact Details

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- Direct from NHMRC
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Date: 29-6-2009_____

Name: (please print) Phillip J Robinson_____

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phillip J Robinson".



Comments on Consultation Paper on NHMRC's Research Fellowships Scheme – 25 May 2009

Name:	Phillip J Robinson
Organisation:	NARF (National Association of Research Fellows)
Position:	President of NARF

Please type your comments to the questions and issues raised in the Consultation Paper directly into the table below. If you have no comments please enter “No Comment” in the table for this question or issue.

<p>Questions and Issues for Comment:</p> <p>1. Aims of the Research Fellowship scheme</p> <p>Comment:</p> <p>NARF believes that the existing aims are appropriate but incomplete and should be altered in two key areas.</p> <p>a) Career Structure.</p> <p>Provision of a career structure has been one of the fundamentals of the Fellowships scheme since its inception. This scheme is nationally and internationally regarded as a “jewel in the crown” of the NHMRC. Objective evaluations have indicated its high return on investment. However, the consultation document makes no mention of the phrase “Career Structure”, which is conspicuous by its absence. NHMRC has recently dropped formal recognition of this aim and intentionally steered away from it. All reference to "Career Structure" has been carefully removed from the current policy for 2010 funding. The NHMRC have also removed an entire aim from the scheme in 2008, and re-written the other aims without announcement or public consultation. At the time of writing, Research Committee (RC) were unable to confirm to NARF in writing that the changes were made by any members of RC, only that RC were in broad agreement with them.</p> <p>The 5 aims of the scheme in 2007 and previous years were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To develop and support highly productive Australian biomedical and health research scientists so that they can continue to undertake research which is competitive. 2. To provide these researchers with a career structure in which renewal or promotion are based on stringent review of research achievements and performance and potential for further success in the future. 3. To foster an intellectual environment in which health and medical research supports the training of future medical researchers. 4. To encourage the translation of research outcomes into health practice. 5. To facilitate interaction between NHMRC Research Fellows and industry. <p>The 4 aims of the scheme in 2008 and 2009 are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To support highly productive Australian biomedical and health research scientists in research of the highest quality; 2. To create knowledge through investment in research which benefits Australia;

3. To foster an intellectual environment which builds the capacity of Australian research for the future
4. To encourage knowledge transfer to improve health and to contribute to Australia's prosperity.

The changes to the aims made in 2008 appear to be quite specific – to remove the concept of “Career Structure” from all aspects of the scheme. E.g., removal of initial aim 2, removal of the word “Develop” in relation to supporting scientists. NARF members are strongly of the view that the scheme should retain the aim of supporting a research career structure as it is a fundamental component of the success and attractiveness of the scheme to younger scientists. The original wording of this aim satisfactorily encompassed this aim of the scheme. The concept of career structure here in the aims should be seen in the context of all other elements of the scheme (see Other Comments at the end).

Career support should not be confused with tenure and was never meant to imply it was. To achieve the aim of fostering an intellectual environment requires the concept that the Fellowship is the career base from which this is achieved. There is not the expectation that a Fellow will close down shop in 5 years, but that the Fellow has a high likelihood of winning a new Fellowship to sustain their research team. The new aims seem to address research outcomes with little reference to those people that deliver them, yet this is a people support scheme, not a project grant. The new aims do not address the need to support sustainable excellence in research by the scientists who deliver scientific outcomes or who create innovation. Therefore the aim to provide a career structure is a key element of this scheme that we strongly feel must be restored.

b) Scientific Leadership:

NARF members recommend a new aim concerning scientific leadership. Being a Fellow is not only about being a “leading scientist” in a particular discipline, but is also about showing “scientific leadership” for Australia and internationally. This attribute is assessed as a part of the interview along with an assessment of factors in addition to grant and publication numbers.

- Leading Scientists. The current aims are clear on providing intellectual leadership to the particular discipline.

- Scientific Leadership: One of the aims should be to provide scientific leadership in medical research in general. This involves being a relatively high profile scientist in terms of public presentations, policy development, high profile on the international stage, attracting students and postdocs, training postdocs that develop their own groups, engagement in peer review above and beyond normal levels. In short, a Fellowship is awarded in part on the high national and international profile of the persons' scientific leadership, in addition to their research impact. Fellows have leading roles in policy development in this country, and leading roles in IP translation – in fact they are key drivers. They are magnets and inspiration for younger scientists making career choices and they are examples for all Australians of some of Australia's best-of-the-best. It is paramount that the aims of the scheme should reflect this.

2. Alignment between the aims of the scheme, selection criteria, scoring and ranking processes and feedback report to the applicants

Comment:

Most NARF members feel that providing the peer review panels (PRPs) with a scoring matrix is a reasonably positive initiative, *provided* it is ONLY used as an initial ranking aid, and is NOT for the final ranked list. However, the proposed “scoring matrix” in the consultation paper is far too simple, inflexible and is surprisingly poorly drafted. In the form presented it would cause damage.

The 5-point scale has no discriminating power:

The quite small 5 point scale does not have nearly enough discriminatory power to separate Fellows, which becomes critically important at the funding margins. For the last 8 years the funding cut-off has been entirely within level 4 (Excellent), therefore it's of little discriminatory value to rank most applicants as 4. The proposed matrix simply lacks resolution, because a large number of applicants will get the same score from the majority of panel members. A single panel member with an outlier score would skew the outcome in a major way for applications near the funding borderline.

The scoring matrix must only be an initial guide:

It is essential that the “scoring matrix” does not become proscriptive and prevent the PRP members from formulating the final ranked list after discussion. If the matrix is abused by being used as a final ranking list, there will be considerable imbalances. All panel members will understand that there is a large variance in scores from day 1 to the last day of ranking. If policy is changed to incorporate the matrix, the policy must indicate that the matrix is an initial, not final ranking tool.

The scoring matrix needs to be flexible:

A primary concern is that any such matrix should reflect the uniqueness and individuality of different Fellows. The scheme appoints individuals with a wide variety of skill sets and experiences for 6 years, so a rigid set of evaluation parameters is dangerous. Almost all previous members of PRPs have commented that they were initially surprised at the diversity and breadth of ways one could be deemed by the PRPs to be an “outstanding Fellow”. Each individual candidate scientist brings to the panels their own unique strengths, the sum of which provides the convincing case for appointment. Hence the proposed scoring matrix should include flexibility in how one arrives at a given score.

The proposed draft Selection Criteria need considerable development:

The aims of the scheme need to include elements of Career Structure and elements of Scientific Leadership (see point 1 above). These should be more specifically included in the Scoring Matrix. This information is already provided in the application and is one focus during interview, such as Contribution to the Discipline (organisation of conferences, editorial boards, reviewing etc), role in the broader workings of science at the policy level. The matrix should also include: Evidence of the Impact of Research.

The proposed weighting is unbalanced:

The weighting requires careful thought: Vision for the next five years, intellectual leadership and contribution: this requires higher rating. Quality of Research Output: slightly reduced. Research Supervision and Mentoring: this section is far too simple and needs development.

The matrix will change behaviour:

There is considerable the danger that having such a scoring matrix will change the behaviour of Fellows in a negative manner. We all know that *policy drives behaviour*. The Program Grant and other schemes have amply demonstrated this over many years. The NHMRC needs to carefully consider what it wants to drive within Fellows and examine the impact of any matrix on these behaviours, which should include scientific excellence and scientific leadership.

3. Position Classification Statements

Comment:

This is an issue that should not be examined in isolation from the whole scheme. Many NARF members agree that the Position Classification Statements (PCS) are confusing and do not readily appear to match reality. A knee-jerk response is to readily agree to remove them. However we firstly maintain that there are no advantages to the scheme of removing them. Secondly, they are widely recognised to perform a number of important functions, particularly for university Fellows vs MRI Fellows. The PCS’s need to be viewed for what they are: *baseline* indicators for a competitive process that occur above them. This could more easily be explained in policy (as it already is) rather than simply removing them.

For example PCSs are important tools when a Fellow changes employment institution as they enable NHMRC-specific expectations to be fully defined in the final institutional job description. In contrast to the posited NHMRC argument that PCSs are the responsibility of the employing institution, they strongly assist Fellows in actually determining what those responsibilities should be when negotiating their own position with their employer. This has the important consequence of preventing the universities from encroaching upon “NHMRC-time”, important in overall productivity.

The Fellow is appointed on the basis of meeting quite specific criteria, which are assessed by expert researchers. It is not at all clear why the Fellow should then undergo a second assessment by their own Institution in order to negotiate an appropriate position. In many situations Fellows may wish to apply for promotion within their institution if they feel that they have met their local criteria for a more senior position, however minimum levels of academic appointment should be linked to each type of Fellowship - otherwise it is too open to misinterpretation (and even exploitation) within Institutions; this could include requiring Fellows to contribute to their organisation in ways that are not required by their Fellowship and could ultimately make them less competitive for renewal.

When considering PCSs, most people, particularly first-time applicants, do not appreciate what they are for and see them only as way-below reality. However, like any award at multiple levels, they provide important external criteria for minimal performance for eligibility. Being based on parallel academic appointments, the PCSs are only the starting point for a *competition*. The aim of the scheme and the panels is to select the best-of-the-best. Therefore it is to be expected that all applicants must *meet* these criteria, but to be competitive within them is a different story. For example, what if all Australia's Level E academics were assessed together? Only a few would be deemed outstanding. This does not indicate that all the others are failures! That is the very nature of a competitive process where not everyone can be permitted to be at the top.

There is widespread NARF *in principle* support for simplifying the PCS, but we do not advocate their removal. Again, the important point is the nature of the new wording. Considerable thought and consultation of proposed drafts should be carried out before these Statements are altered.

4. Numbers of Fellows at different Fellowship levels

Comment:

The NARF view is that the numbers of Fellows at different levels is both adequate and appropriate as it is, *given* that there should not be a sustained increase in Fellows *in the absence* of sustained parallel increases in overall project grant support. Any extrinsic move to alter this ratio would be potentially damaging to the overall aims of the scheme, particularly to Aim 1. Specifically, attempts to address this by means other than sustained funding increases will have the inevitable consequence of being anti-competitive, and risks devastating the research success of those already deemed to be among Australia's very best.

The Pyramid Problem:

This is an issue that has been discussed at great length for many years, and was a major topic of the previous Fellowships consultation. It stems back to intrinsically flawed and contradictory statements in the Wills review: the desire to support career structures while establishing a system with few at the top and not providing unlimited funding for it. The basis on which the "pyramid" concept was initially devised has proven to not be supported by 15 years of facts and experience internationally.

The strength of the scheme in selecting the best, prevents a pure pyramid:

A scientist already deemed by the panel to be outstanding over their career is statistically far more likely to remain outstanding. The NHMRC should not be in the business of penalising success, but *supporting* it. This is particularly cogent when the very success potentially to be penalised was achieved through the concerted efforts of specific NHMRC policies. The success rate of existing Fellows in applications for renewal is usually substantially higher than the success rate of new applicants. This has been used to suggest that the application procedure may be biased towards existing Fellows. However, using simple selection theory, in the absence of any bias, the success rate of existing Fellows is *expected* to be much larger than that of new applicants. For example, for a realistic range of 10% to 30% for the success rates of new applicants, the *expected* success rate for existing fellows only varies from 68% to 74%, which is the same range as real-world experience. Therefore the expected success rate of existing Fellows ought to be substantially larger than that of new applicants *because they are a highly selected group*. The consequence is that system would be shown

to be defective if it failed to accumulate successful scientists at the higher levels. These issues have nothing to do with bias or perceptions thereof, but demonstrate that the expectation of the scheme producing a pure pyramid is not mathematically sound.

The scheme already has sufficient pyramid structure. When considered together with CDAs:

- There are presently far more CDAs than Fellows at any level. NARF advocates they be included (at least the more senior ones) into the Fellowship scheme. The CDA level has grown considerably and spans 12 years of career structure, now including 2 separate appointment categories.
- There are far more SRFs than higher levels. If one “adjusts” the data by splitting SRFs in two groups, then this might “appear” to disappear.
- PRFs and SPRFs are at lower numbers of appointment, than SRF or CDA.
- Initial appointments at the senior two levels are rare. *The overwhelming majority of new appointments have always been, and continue to be at the CDA or SRF levels.* This is a specific design feature of the current policy. It is excellent and is working effectively since it was changed in about 2002.

Unnaturally enforcing a pyramid where one already partly exists requires three unrealistic actions: providing unlimited new funds at the base, introducing lifetime limits on the number of fellowships an individual can ever hold, or providing forced retirement of outstanding senior scientists at the top. The latter scenario would require imposition of new “level-quotas”. This in turn greatly diminishes the concept of an open and fair competition, or the need to appoint only the most outstanding researchers. It will also remove the last vestiges of a potential career structure. In what way would the scheme remain attractive to our overseas or younger scientists if quotas were imposed at the top? NARF is categorically opposed to level-quotas, as they are anti-competitive. Imposing a pyramid to suit inappropriate concepts makes no sense.

5. Are the current four levels of Fellowship appropriate?

Comment:

Appointment levels:

NARF does not believe there are major problems with the 4 levels, but feels that CDAs could be incorporated as a 5th level. To alter significantly these four levels would place the NHMRC fellows out of any possible synchrony with academia, create a rift with academics and hamper attempts to exit from the scheme. The NHMRC is specifically proposing to foster flexibility within and without the scheme. It is important to recognise that these levels assist in maintaining that flexibility by providing recognisable parallels with academia. They provide the basis for a Fellow to argue an appointment level at a university. Fellows who have only worked at MRIs also might fail to appreciate this significance. They have major impacts on the careers of many Fellows, hence their further potential for high level research achievement. It needs to be recognised that Fellows are appointed by Panels whose members primarily include those who are responsible for making parallel academic appointments. Most Fellows would undertake a number of such assessments for universities every year. Hence academic levels have considerable meaning, broad recognition and understanding in Australia. Considerable confusion in the research community arises because it is not fully appreciated that Fellowships are awarded only at the highest level within each category, hence, by their very nature they must always *appear* out-of-synchrony with the parallel academic appointment. If this did not occur, the NHMRC should be concerned that they were not being used wisely. To break Fellowships from accepted, established, broadly understood academic appointment levels creates *no benefit* to anyone.

Despite all the above, there are sound arguments for minor tweaking of the parity of the existing levels with academia. SPRF appointees generally would be considered to perform above the standard Professorial level. However at the other end, SRFs frequently operate at Associate Professorial levels. The poor salary support by the scheme does not reflect this, yet these are criteria used by the review panels. Hence, one view is that the real equation is that SRFs = two levels of Associate Professor,

while PRF/SPRF – two levels of professorial appointment.

There are logical-sounding suggestions to merge SRFA and B. However, this is risky as they cover such a broad range of experience years that it would be very difficult to compare them with each other, resulting in competition that disadvantages the younger applicants. This is exactly the NHMRC experience with CDAs, which also span about 12 years. The NHMRC only recently split these into two levels for very practical comparative reasons, and to near universal acclaim.

There are concerns about the *name* of some of the levels: eg SRFA and B are not prestigious-sounding titles, particularly since “Senior Research Fellow B” is supposed to be higher than SRFA. Only an Australian, familiar with the scheme, would understand. These are not trivial issues, because they impact on the international standing of our Fellows. Therefore it’s not helpful in the international arena in which Fellows operate.

CDAs and RFs:

CDAs should be added the Fellowships scheme as a new level, at least those at CDA level 2. They are essentially the equivalent of RFs and it would be appropriate to treat them as such. Similarly the term CDA is a misnomer. To refer to a 35-45 yr old scientist with a history of grant funding and an independent team as still being engaged in "career development" is not to recognize and acknowledge what they really are. It is at best confusing and at worse inaccurate and condescending.

Salary:

NHMRC levels are totally out of synchrony with real-world salaries. This is due to them not being reviewed for at least 10 years, and increasing by only 0-2% pa, far below cpi or academic salary increases. They have now been seriously eroded and have never been subjected to an external or independent review. When a Fellow is awarded a “prestigious” Fellowship they then are required to go and beg their university or MRI to cover the shortfall. NARF calls for a review of these award “packages”.

The NHMRC in recent years has used the “defence” that it is not an employer. Regardless of the dubious legalities of this claim, it indeed has a responsibility to ensure that its “packages” are of a sufficient level to match the status and acknowledged significance of the award and to ensure that the research is facilitated, rather than hampered. NARF also notes the lack of parallel with the Federation Fellowships and Australia Fellowships where the packages are far in excess of a near equivalent NHMRC Research Fellow.

6. Fellows re-applying for appointment

Comment:

Automatic Interview on Re-Application:

Recognition of the significance of “Career Structure” by the NHMRC is acknowledged here within this consultation paper: “The Fellowship Scheme was developed initially as an alternative career structure to the academic structure”. This is followed by an immediate attempt to dilute this by the incorrect statements that “Following the phasing out of block funding, the scheme was changed to an open competitive scheme. NHMRC offers Fellowships at 4 levels, available to the best candidates for appointment at each level.” Toying with the wording of these conditions does not alter the fact that outside block-funded institutes (ending 10 years ago), Fellowships have always and only been awarded in open-competition. Changes in the last few years have only emphasised this competitiveness. The consultation document seeks to claim covertly that the Fellowships are not intended to support the careers of the best and brightest biomedical researchers.

The consultation document also tries to paint the automatic right to interview for existing Fellows as some kind of hangover from the previous scheme of more than 10 years ago. This is simply not the

case. This specific issue was a central part of the 2004 Fellowships consultation and was soundly affirmed at that time. The full issue of what constitutes Career Structure is discussed at the end of this document under “Other Comments”.

NARF maintains that the automatic right to an interview is one of the three elements that are initially awarded along with the first Fellowship – to support the career structure of the scheme. Its removal now is not supported, and would remove all but one remaining element of career structure from the scheme. As a side-effect it would also be unfair to the existing fellows who have already been awarded a current fellowship under the terms and conditions which offered the 6th and 7th years potential.

The right of an existing Fellow to be interviewed was introduced 15 years ago to deal with a specific issue of maintaining a level playing field. Firstly people may need reminding that an interview is not a guarantee of any type of award, it is only *a protection against culling*. The Fellowships at all times remain an open competition, and the interview is no advantage except against culling. Culling is based on the major demand of time required to interview all applicants. All systems have flaws, and fellowships are no exception. A number of Fellows report to NARF their distress at being culled when they first applied, and finally being appointed after a later attempt. Whether they were appropriately culled the first time can be seriously questioned. However, *it is a measure of the schemes’ integrity* that having already been ranked as one of the best and brightest earns them the right to have their case at least fully heard, and not to be culled.

The rationale behind the original policy was that renewing fellows were not disadvantaged compared to new applicants. New applicants have many years in which to pick their best year to apply for a Fellowship, so they look at their peak in that particular year. Renewing Fellows are subject to short term cycles that all scientists experience in their career in the real world. Such cycles can compromise a competitive process because Fellows work on a large time frame specifically required by the scheme. The interview process enables the renewing Fellow to state his or her case and to respond fully to any concerns raised. The policy of automatic interview for renewing Fellows is an important part of the overall process and complements the 6th year and 7th year in providing a level playing field for renewing fellows. When coupled with the interview process, it forms part of a very effective strategy to determine whether a Fellow is indeed under-performing (in relative terms). Given the non-tenured nature of the Fellowship Scheme and the high risk career that Fellows have accepted, they should be given the chance to explain if they temporarily become uncompetitive, and it is appropriate that existing Fellows should automatically be granted an interview.

7. Application process

Comment:

Level of Appointment:

There is strong overall support for the proposed changes. However, the details of what the changes ultimately involve are critically important and specific proposals should be put forward for comment. For example, it should still be essential that the new applicant select a box on their application form as to their desired level of initial appointment. Similarly, Fellows applying again should indicate whether they are applying for a promotion or not. Further, could the Panels award promotions even if the applicant did not request one? This could be a desirable outcome, but one that would put pressure on the available funding.

Another critical issue is that of going backwards in the scheme. Specifically, should an existing Fellow be reappointed, but at a lower level? While one must clearly consider the application in front of you, such a scenario may have adverse repercussions for the NHMRC. If the community were to note that former SPRFs were now being awarded PRFs etc, it would generate extremely negative perceptions of the scheme as a whole, and what it thought it was achieving – negative growth? These sorts of pitfalls must be carefully managed and worked through before any specific changes are implemented.

8. Early re-application

Comment:

Promotion out-of-synchrony:

There is strong support to continue this policy unchanged.

An overall stated aim of the current consultation process is to increase flexibility within the scheme. To prevent application for promotion is a restrictive, backward and inflexible strategy that should be rejected. If someone is performing exceptionally well and they meet the criteria for promotion, then it is appropriate that they come forward at the appropriate time. Even university promotions have a maximum of 2 years wait for re-application. Promotion should be on merit, not on seniority. Preventing high performance individuals from progressing for purely administrative reasons is incompatible with a fair and balanced scheme that takes into consideration that it is a scheme for dealing with researchers (people) not research (project grants). The scheme is about outstanding human beings who have different and unique needs and abilities.

The NHMRC consultation paper has clouded the issue by skewing the question away from reality. The comment “it adds substantially to the peer review load of the panel and, with the current policy of conducting interviews, it also reduces the number of new applicants that can be interviewed” are substantially over-stated. Firstly, the collective NARF experience as either chairs or members of panels is that application for promotion out-of-synchrony has been neither a major problem nor a burden. Secondly, how is this considered a burden, when the current policy provides for the clock to restart and the successful applicant for promotion is to be awarded a new 5 year Fellowship? This policy was modified after the 2004 consultation to reduce this load to what was overwhelmingly perceived then, and now, as a fair and balanced process. The policy from 2004 allows for promotion out-of-synchrony only within the middle two years of a fellowship, effectively restricting the promotion to once per Fellowship tenure.

The current policy reflects the dynamic nature of research outcomes which do not always fall at the end of a 5 year funding interval when renewals are required – true for either highs or lows in a cycle. The scheme itself is not very flexible in other areas, so this early re-application provides some element of positive responsiveness to research success.

The existing policy document requires minor clarification on this issue. It needs to be clarified that early re-application by existing Fellows does not constitute an automatic right to interview (that right is only for a new application after 5 years). The policy could be more explicit that successful promotion out-of-synchrony requires specific demonstration of a significant boost in productivity and/or recognition that is over and above what would be expected for the normal performance of the Fellow at the current level.

9. Fellowship interviews

Comment:

Interviews:

NARF members have a diversity of views on this issue. The majority (approximately 80% of respondents to NARF) strongly support interviews being retained as essential, while a minority are strongly against them. The issue arouses strong emotion. Therefore caution is required.

The issue of Fellowship interviews is complex because it is mixed up with fear and discomfort about talking about oneself in shining terms – something not all scientists are comfortable with. Many Fellows feel they are less articulate than others at interview. However some of these do not appreciate that they *did* become a Fellow – ie the panels recognise this and are still capable of recognising the best and brightest.

Fellows are supposed to be Scientific Leaders in the research and broader Australian communities, frequently earning high national honours. It is relatively simple to ascertain that an applicant is a Leading Scientist by their paper trail; however it is much harder to evaluate the claims on paper concerning Scientific Leadership. Communication skills are undoubtedly important for Fellows. It can be argued that those unable to articulate the evidence of the Scientific Leadership at interview are not necessarily good role models. Thus, being articulate is already a feature of successful Fellows. Determining the award of a Fellowship is a *balance* of many factors, not requiring a score of 100% in all of them.

Interviews elicit a large amount of information not otherwise attainable. They offer the opportunity to flesh out details that are important for the decision making of the committee. They are absolutely essential to get a truer idea of the precise contribution of an applicant who may be part of a larger team of many senior researchers. Such applicants are normally at a great disadvantage if they cannot look a panel in the eye and explain that their role is not merely supportive, but truly leading, in spite of always seeming to be the middle author.

Interviews do have their limitations and weakness and they are not perfect. The interview experience can vary enormously depending on the style, attitude or interview experience of the spokesperson. New panel members are occasionally more adversarial than necessary, which may give the applicant the feeling that the interview did not go well. Even this however is strongly mitigated by a vibrant panel who have equal votes on the ranking and may not necessarily equate with a bad outcome for that candidate!

It would be most unusual in any area of government or industry to appoint senior executive level people without an interview - and the same should continue to apply to Fellowships. Since Fellowships are awarded for a 5-year period, such a policy would mean that the Fellow could apply for promotion only every 5 years. This is not in line with any real world policies where promotion should be based on the track record, productivity, and calibre of the applicant. Appointing a Fellow who later is deemed not to have performed indicates that initial selection process may have faulted and it is in the interests of proper peer review to find out why by interview. Panels have successfully done this for years.

NARF proposes that interviews should also be introduced for CDAs. A concern is whether the CDA review process is selecting the right people. Introducing an interview would improve the selection of CDA fellows. At the CDA level, particularly at CDA 1, it is possible to have an excellent publication record but not have an independent thought in one's head, or to have any real drive. Interviews sort this out rapidly and effectively.

Written Rebuttals:

Panel concerns cannot be equally well addressed in a written rebuttal. The proposition that a written response is somehow fairer is not supported. It cannot be clear who assisted with the written response or how long was required for an appropriate response to be prepared. It is not a dynamic 2-way interaction. The applicant has the responsibility for explaining their own proposal and for explaining to the panel any other aspects of their case for appointment. Consider the value of the written rebuttal in the NHMRC Project Grant Scheme? It does not have a great influence on the outcome of the grant ranking apart from providing information about publication update and resolving some technical issues. It is important in about 2% of grants.

In the case of a report written for a Fellowship vs one written for a grant, they are very personal and very difficult to de-identify – for good reasons. Therefore it is exceedingly challenging to obtain reports that can be sent to the applicant at all.

10. Seventh year Grant-in-Aid support for unsuccessful applicants

Comment:

There are mixed views amongst NARF members on this issue, but NARF recommends that the 7th year GIA should be retained. There is danger in considering this issue in isolation from what the NHMRC wants to maintain in its Fellowships scheme. Many people suggest going ahead and scrapping the GIA. Almost always they have not personally faced the situation where this support is important or for which they were originally designed, and frequently this is a knee-jerk response to the (untrue) prospect of creating a new younger fellowship.

GIA's represent part of the evidence that the NHMRC is well aware, and proud of, the fact that Fellowships are prestigious awards to the top *people*. They are to facilitate the completion of research studies for which NHMRC has already heavily invested (normally at an absolute minimum level of over \$1m for the salary alone). They are not research grants, they are research leadership grants. People must be considered with great care. This includes their career progression. The very principle of any fellowship anywhere in the world is to nurture people in science. Removing the GIA is an "easy target" that sends the message that saving half of one Fellowship is better than supporting the wind-down of someone who has performed outstandingly well, normally, for at least 10 years. They are critical elements of the overall "career structure" of the Fellowships scheme, and to remove them makes no sense.

The Consultation Document is misleading in the background it provides to this topic. There is no evidence that "the funds involved could otherwise be used for new Fellowship appointments". The collective experience of NARF members who have been on Panels since 2001 reveals that there are usually 0-3 such applicants in any given year. Not all are successfully awarded a GIA. Some who have been awarded, have proceeded to a new Fellowship the following year, clearly indicating they were in a temporary slump only, for which the GIA's were partly designed. The overall cost is extremely small and inconsequential to the discussion: - they are for a single year only, and represent, when all are combined, a total "package" of perhaps 50% of a single new Fellowship. Abolishing GIA's will not normally provide a single new Fellowship. They should remain as they are – considered on a case-by-case basis. The fact that they are so rarely used or required is a strong testament to the overall strength of the current policy.

Changes in the GIA that seem constructive might include introducing clearer guidelines and eligibility criteria. Suggestions include: eligibility requirement of being a fellowship holder for at least 10 years; that a specific and appropriate research plan is provided (not just a path to retirement). These issues require only clarification within the existing policy document.

11. Head of Department Report

Comment:

NARF agrees that the HOD report could be replaced with a support assurance letter.

Furthermore, when a CDA applies for a Fellowship, the HOD is required to specify what resources and space will be provided to the applicant. Consideration should be given to this change in the Fellowships scheme as well, as a means to strengthen the position of the Fellow, should they be successful. This would have an impact on the Fellows who are squeezed for space by their institution after appointment, a situation some Fellows have occasionally experienced. This would impede productivity, which is not the goal of the award from the NHMRC perspective.

12. Career Development Awards and the NHMRC Fellowship scheme

Comment:

NARF believes that the number of CDA appointments are appropriate now and should remain approximately at the current level. We do not believe NHMRC CDAs should be given any special access to NHMRC Research Fellowships.

Comments on the pathways between the CDA and the RF scheme:

The NHMRC should be congratulated on its recent expansion of CDAs. NARF maintains that it has already achieved the required outcomes at this point. In addition, we perceive no reason to *decrease* CDA appointments. There does not need to be a specific preferential pathway between any of the schemes (scholarships, postdocs, CDAs or Fellowships). It must be emphasized that the NHMRC has done an excellent overall job of providing positions that encompass all aspects of a research career. The CDA is not an isolated scheme. It is part of the entire spectrum of the biomedical workforce. It is not necessary nor expected that these positions are to be perceived as a single path, rather than an *aspirational* path. The importance is that each step in this path can be seen to exist. Our members have each reviewed many hundreds of CVs, and can attest that there are many roads to a Research Fellowship, with few who have been NHMRC career award supported for most of their path.

CDA recipients do not have a greater success rate for entry to the Fellowship scheme than for any other applicants. This raises the question of whether the CDA award criteria should be reassessed. CDAs are not interviewed, so their genuine ability, as distinct from their perceived track record, cannot be genuinely assessed. Is this optimal value for money?

As above, NARF favours merging CDAs, at least the top level, with the Fellowships scheme, and renaming them Research Fellows. They should be interviewed.

13. ARC Future Fellowship Scheme

Comment:

NARF members are of the unanimous view that there should be no “adjustments” to the NHMRC People Support schemes in light of the new ARC Future Fellowships (FF). No member feels that the existence of the FF is a sign for the NHMRC to reduce appointment levels to one of its flagship schemes, particularly the CDA or Fellowships schemes. FFs are a one-off scheme, covering all disciplines of science, with medicine potentially low on the priority list. Almost 30 years ago the NHMRC introduced the Dora Lush postgraduate scholarship to fill the gap in support of *Medical Research* training, despite the relative abundance of university postgraduate awards (APA) at the time. This position has proved visionary, with these awards capturing and engaging many dozens of scientists who are now among our most successful biomedical scientists (Fellows and non-fellows). Similarly, the FF has yet to show any sign that it will significantly improve the training or opportunities for medical research. Therefore it is premature for the NHMRC to consider making adjustments at this early stage; rather it should continue to maintain leadership. We perceive the NHMRC as already being on the right leadership path for Australia with its existing People Support schemes and having a strategy to provide for the overall best possible medical research outcomes.

14. Gender imbalance

Comment:

NARF agrees that this is an important issue, which has been a major topic of the previous 2004 Fellowships review. There is no hint of gender bias at any level of the current process. The imbalance in applications by women to the scheme does not appear to be clearly unique to the Fellowships scheme, but may reflect a broader societal effect. It is unclear why so many young women undertake PhD degrees without follow-up or without long term career aspirations or whether they are simply blocked or put-off in some way. Understanding the basis of the disparity is necessary before making

policy decisions. The statistics suggest that one problem is the number applying, not the number successful. We note there are equal success rates for males and females to the scheme, suggesting that the review process itself may not be inherently biased and may not require modification. The issue would therefore primarily appear to be the low numbers of females applying for the Fellowship scheme. The majority of women at the Fellowship stage of their careers will have substantial time commitment to raising a young family.

Unfortunately there are few practical suggestions that are specific to the Fellowships. No one supports any type of affirmative action, as this is considered by both genders to be anti-competitive. NARF believes all appointments should be based on merit in open competition.

A contributing factor for the imbalance is that one cannot apply for a part-time Fellowship upfront for the entire 5 years (as distinct from shorter periods of part-time appointment within an existing fellowship, discussed below in Q15). While such an option seems likely to improve opportunities for female applicants it is a dangerous path for the scheme as a whole. Part-time Fellowships have not been considered previously for good reasons. It is near impossible to assess a part-time scientist against a full-time scientist for overall research productivity, sustained achievement and international recognition. This is partly why the Practitioner Fellowships are an entirely separate scheme. The concept of being “outstanding part time” is a difficult one. If opened up to part-time females, then what about males? This may create a new problem.

The most widely agreed response of the NHMRC should be to make maternity and parental leave easier and much more explicit at the policy level *within* the tenure of an existing Fellowship (see detail in point 15 below). Allowing part time appointment for a specific, limited time period for existing Fellows, after maternity leave without loss of the total amount of support would help existing female Fellows.

15. Increasing the flexibility of the Research Fellowships Scheme – Fellows able to suspend award for up to two years.

Comment:

The current policy allows for Fellowships to be suspended for maternity, parental or other special needs on a case-by-case basis. There is strong overall support from NARF to formalise, expand and clarify this. However rigid criteria for eligibility for fellowship suspension should be carefully worked out. Part-time fellowship suspensions are strongly supported when the appropriate reasons are put forward. However caution is required for full-time Fellowship suspension.

Part-time Fellowship:

The case for suspension of a fellowship on a part-time basis should be clearly made in cases such as maternity, paternity, family illness etc. Such cases should be flexible and allow for a second fellowship suspension if required. They could be virtually automatic upon application, for specific limits of, e.g., 24 months. If a fellow converted to part-time for less than 24 months (at 50%) then their fellowship would be extended for less than 1 year – not useful as they would still need to apply for renewal at the end of the 5th year.

Full-time Fellowship suspension:

The case for full-time Fellowship suspension is much less clear, particularly for two years. Fellows are already expected to contribute to all research related activities, so it's not clear who would need this suspension. It is quite unclear how the NHMRC or medical research outcomes would benefit. We propose that there needs to be a legitimate reason (eg maternity, health or parental leave), apart from keeping all options open, in case the new career does not work out. Specific guidelines should be carefully developed for fairness, to clarify the purpose of the fellowship suspension, and to determine how it will enhance the overall objectives of the fellowship scheme. There appears to be no reason why someone who has decided upon a different career path outside the direct biomedical research framework should be allowed to suspend their Fellowship, rather than reapply in open competition.

We also warn of the danger of going too far. There needs to be a limit to the number of times a Fellow could suspend the Fellowship or it could become unworkable. For example, a fellow with two suspensions and a 6th year could stretch out a Fellowship as long as 10 years. We do not think this is what is intended. Similarly, following a 6 month full-time or 12 month part-time suspension, a Fellow would still need to renew in the 5th year, or there would be a funding shortfall. If renewed, a new Fellowship starts and the suspension time is lost. Hence suspension only works in the real world for periods of 12 months.

Overall NARF supports flexibility of tenure to the extent:

- Parents or carers, or people with health issues should be able to suspend a fellowship for 1 year, for a maximum of twice within a 5 yr appointment. This would extend the fellowship funding clock by an equivalent period (up to a 2 year limit).
- Parents or carers, or people with health issues should be able to convert a fellowship to a 50% part-time option for 24 months within a Fellowship. This would extend the fellowship funding clock by 1 year. Note that shorter suspension for less than 24 months is not practical as it would put the Fellows out of synchrony with the funding cycle and create a funding shortfall.

16. Proposed Emeritus Fellowship

Comment:

There is broad support amongst NARF members for the concept of an Emeritus Fellowship. Despite this, there are multiple issues to consider.

Of what benefit is this to the NHMRC, the nation, to the Emeritus Fellow, or to progressing medical research? This issue has been extensively discussed by previous RCs, and abandoned as a nice idea, but of no practical value. The process generates new work and costs new money. Workers and money are in extremely short supply. There seems to be no obvious use or benefit of this proposal if neither funding nor privileges are involved. A level of \$5k pa is far less than a token amount, and would barely cover attendance at a conference, and certainly not part-time research pursuits. Given there is not sufficient money and these are non-competitive grants, should any amount be provided?

NARF advises caution in developing a specific policy. We advocate a 'threshold' of achievement to earn the title. For example people who have received 3 or more NHMRC Fellowships, and who were supported as an NHMRC Fellow at the time of retirement. This is appropriate only for Fellows retiring at SPRF level, and perhaps PRF, but not all levels. The duration of the award needs to be considered: 5 years or a lifetime achievement? If 5 years, can an emeritus Fellow re-apply? What would be the criteria or process? The NHMRC should not really consider applicants from those who were not Fellows at the time of retirement. Would this scheme be backdated to Fellows who retired prior to its implementation? Thus, the important information is actually the wording of a draft policy.

Other Comments:

a) It is intrinsically valuable to have an open consultation on any or all of the NHMRC's funding schemes from time to time. The NHMRC is rightly proud of its support for career structure of Australian biomedical researchers and needs to keep this consideration in mind when introducing changes. Since the long-term nature of the scheme is up for consideration here, the 16 discussion points above should not be considered in isolation from each other, or from the entire scheme. It is important to consider changes to the scheme as a whole. In the end, all appointments are made with reference to the overall aims of the scheme which need to reflect its true goals of fostering research excellence and leadership. Poorly thought-through changes in one area can have strong negative impact on other aspects of the scheme or upon its overall objectives and national esteem. There is danger in examining issues in isolation from each other as they can appear much simpler than they are.

b) Career Structure:

The scheme was designed from the ground up to include an element of “Career Structure”. The NHMRC Research Fellowships scheme is truly outstanding, because of its long-standing measures that genuinely support *people*. This is at the heart of its success and both national and international reputation. These specific elements are encapsulated in the following 4 *features* of the scheme:

1. A primary aim of the scheme is (was) to support the potential for providing a career structure if the Fellow continues to succeed in open competition (recently removed from the policy).

When being awarded a Fellowship the Fellow *wins* a number of things that *form part of the Fellowship package*:

2. The right to a 6th year of support if they are not renewed at year 5
3. The right to be *considered* for a 7th year GIA if they make a strong case, normally to wind-up research.
4. The right to be interviewed for a *new Fellowship* (not re-appointment, there is not such thing) on the basis that they have already demonstrated they were performing in the highest percentile already. This is to prevent culling of their application.

Among these 4 features of the scheme, the first has been unceremoniously removed already, and 3 and 4 are now being considered for possible removal. This leaves only the 6th year. The changes being canvassed by the NHMRC within this consultation paper would potentially add up to removal of three of the 4 pillars that make the scheme so successful and so attractive to competition. Fundamental changes to so many of these features will seriously undermine the schemes’ intrinsic value, competitiveness, international recognition and damage the career of some of Australia’s most successful scientists.

A very large number of CDAs have reported to NARF that they see the above features as a fundamental part of the very attractiveness of both the scheme and a broader career in biomedical science. The very existence of these 4 elements therefore underpins the outstanding success of the scheme at all levels. NARF is concerned that it is the specific goal of the NHMRC to severely dilute the scheme by slow erosion of these 4 features, until they are eventually all removed – death by a thousand cuts. If this occurs, the scheme will still be fine in making one-off awards, but will no longer be the shining example to Australians and the international beacon of success that it once was. The NHMRC will have lost something special.

The arguments that these features raise the potential perception that the scheme is not open will always persist and was a major consideration in the 2004 consultation. These perceptions are demonstrably not supported in fact. The present system is a stable one that already allows for open competition for all appointments at all levels. It is the award of the Fellowship itself that provides the three additional features.

The overwhelming majority of Fellows are aged 45-65 yo and have been Fellows for 10 years. If they miss renewal in two years (because they were say 79% instead of 81%), they do not have a fall-back salary or position from which they can demonstrate that the slump was only temporary. Loss of the Fellowship has a far greater impact on their career and on their overall productivity for medical research in Australia. It is not possible to conduct any research program without a salary. Thus the impact to Australia’s overall research outcomes and excellence is considerably greater for long-term Fellows not renewed. It is with full recognition of these issues that the existing policy was carefully crafted as an integrated package to take these issues into consideration when dealing with many of the best-and-brightest.

c) Previous Public Consultation on Fellowships:

A previous and extensive public consultation on Research Fellowships was conducted in 2004. The present consultation document does not appear to be aware of it. The Discussion Paper and related Questionnaire was released on the NHMRC Web-site on 24 May 2004 and was followed by a series of public meetings held in Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane during June and July 2004. A public relations company was engaged to coordinate, implement and facilitate the public

consultations and meetings. Two Secretariat staff, a representative from the RFC and two representatives of RC attended all those public meetings. There were over 500 written submissions that were collated and made public on the NHMRC website. It is surprising that this previous consultation was not mentioned in the present consultation. We note that several of the same issues raised then, are raised again here. They have been previously carefully thought through and analysed. That extensive set of detailed documentation provided an invaluable insight into public opinion at the time and should be made available to those who collate the present information and should be re-presented to the new RC, who may be unaware of this treasure of input from the community.

d) How are decisions made concerning the outcomes of current consultation?

What will happen to all the data collected in this consultation, and who will make the action decisions? The RC that has commissioned this consultation will not be the one that sees the collated responses. It will be a new RC, many of whose members may be inexperienced in policy development and have little history in the scheme. This illustrates a significant risk in having little consistency in policy development and increases the potential for decreased full understanding of the scheme. Such risks are highlighted by the sudden, unannounced, abolishment of the Research Fellowships Committee (RFC) three years ago.

For the prior 15 years or more, the RFC had maintained a long term hands-on understanding and day-to-day management of the implementation of the scheme and comprised chairs of all the Panels who are at the coalface of meeting and selecting Fellows. This group is best placed to consider and to advise RC on the impact and effect of multiple changes to the scheme. It is disappointing and dangerous that there is no longer such a body to advise on the future of the scheme. *NARF strongly advocates the re-establishment of a Fellowships Committee to advise RC on policy development.* The committee should at least include the chairs of the PRPs, as these highly experienced individuals are at the coal-face of policy implementation. There is a risk for the NHMRC in providing this Consultation paper with 16 simple and loaded questions. It may obtain a large amount of feedback without experienced and well-considered arguments from individuals who actually know and understand the full policy. It is very important that the decision-making process to implement changes should engage people who have been recently at the coal-face of the scheme, in particular former panel chairs, who have a vast wealth of experience in implementing the policy.

e) This document represents the consolidated views of NARF, the peak body representing 245 current members. It was prepared by canvassing opinions in writing, by email, phone discussion and member meetings over 6 months. Its content has been read and reviewed by a large percent of its membership. We note that NARF members constitute up to half of all panel members and chairs in the last decade, thus their views represent considerable experience and insight into the fellowship scheme, and a deep understanding of the impact of policy changes on scientific excellence, leadership and career paths. NARF wishes to acknowledge and thank all those who have contributed to this process.

Please return this form by **5pm AEST 29 June 2009** by email to:

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