



AVS News release

The COVID-19 pandemic has so far cost over 400,000 lives, and at a global cost of at least US\$1 trillion. It has wrought great health, economic and social disruption to Australia. The next pandemic may be worse, as infection with many viruses cause higher death rates than SARS-CoV-2, and may have more efficient human-to-human spread. While predicting the timing of the next pandemic is impossible, there is no aspect to its response, including surveillance, detection, diagnosis, treatment, epidemiology, antivirals and vaccines, that would not be improved by investing in basic research. We do not know what virus will cause the next pandemic, with the only certainty being its inevitability.

The Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes in 2018 commissioned a study of medical research investment in Australia. That report found that for every \$1 invested in medical research, \$3.90 is returned to the broader economy in the form of both community health benefits and direct financial returns from commercialization. In a pandemic response this multiplier may be dramatically higher. Further investment in medical research simply makes sense.

The Australian Society for Medical Research states that Australia's current investment into health and medical research, through the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Medical Research Future Fund, equates to 0.53% of total health expenditure. This investment in medical research is far below the OECD average and we believe it should be lifted to 3% of health expenditure. Investment in basic, or what is often termed discovery research, is the engine of innovation without which our clinicians and public health researchers would not have the diagnostic, vaccine and antiviral tools needed to combat infectious diseases. Yet development of effective prophylactics and treatments takes years, requiring appropriate biocontainment facilities across the country, sustained funding and a trained workforce.

Between 2012 and 2017 the NHMRC full-time workforce decreased by 20%, reducing our capability to respond to COVID-19. This has resulted in the failure to keep biocontainment facilities in service at several academic institutions, meaning that some suitably trained virologists cannot even begin research with a new virus. While new funds targeting COVID-19 and CSIRO-ACDP labs in Geelong are welcome, in future there must be continued expansion and development of Australia's basic research capability in all disciplines, but especially infection and immunity.

The panic and neglect cycle of funding that characterizes Australia's response to health crises in the past, cannot continue if we are to avoid a potentially greater toll from the emergence of the next Disease X pandemic.

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The Australasian Virology Society represents over 700 members that include Australia and New Zealand's most prominent researchers, clinicians and scientists working with viral infectious diseases and the means for their management and prevention.

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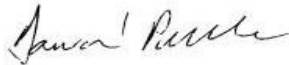


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