

IMPACT DEC 2015: INVESTMENT IN EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS



PERPETUAL IMPACT
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PHOTOS: Woolcock Institute of Medical Research

INVESTMENT IN EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS: IS THIS THE PERFECT IMPACT POINT FOR PHILANTHROPISTS?

It takes a healthy pipeline of talent to fuel future medical research expertise. So nurturing early-career medical researchers is critical to keeping the brightest, most promising researchers in Australia.

With a limited pool of research funding available, it's often difficult for the next generation of researchers to build a track record and establish their credentials. Early-career researchers generally need funds to collect pilot data, travel to conferences or take part in further training to progress their research careers.

Post-doctoral researchers are generally paid modestly through the Federal Government's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) with no allowances provided for training or travel fees. Medical research institutes generally rely on their researchers to apply for funds to provide a salary.

Competition for funds at every stage is tough. "To get an NHMRC early career research fellowship, researchers need to be in the top 15-20%," explains Carol Armour, Executive Director at the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research (WIMR). These fellowships usually last 4 years only, with no guarantee of further funding.

GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR IS DIFFICULT

In most cases, external research funding requires proof that a proposed research project is feasible. When project proposals are submitted they usually contain preliminary or pilot data. The pilot data needs to be collected before the funding is received. Often, this means that early-career researchers are self-funding the collection of pilot data, or if they are lucky, they may have a senior mentor who can help a little.

The pathway to a career in research is not easy, usually involving an initial degree followed by a PhD followed by a postdoctoral period. Early-career researchers face constant uncertainty over funding and their salaries, while ensuring that they maintain productivity to remain viable.

It takes years for a younger researcher to move into the next phase of their career and receive a substantial fellowship. “To receive an independent senior fellowship from the NHMRC, candidates are usually more than 40 years old,” says Armour.



The costs faced to stay in and build a career in research coupled with difficulty in attracting government and private funding in research means Australia is at risk of a talent drain as young people move away from careers in research.

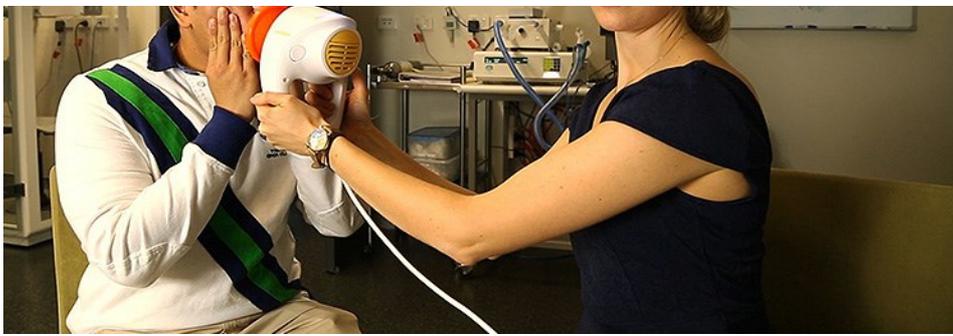
A GRANTS PROGRAM THAT SUPPORTS RESEARCHERS WHEN THEY NEED IT MOST

WIMR, a not-for-profit research organisation focused on respiratory and sleep disorders, has taken steps to combat this issue.

Medical researchers are being proactively supported to stay in the field through a grants program that provides funding assistance to researchers with less than ten years of experience post PhD.

“This initiative is designed to help early-career researchers take their first meaningful step in research so they can then apply for external funding. A key measure of success is when an early-career researcher attains external funding - usually through a fellowship that enables them to work in full-time research,” explains Armour. “The next generation of leaders apply for fellowships to support their salary. They usually work in full-time research or are academic members of staff at a university.”





WIMR has set aside seed funding to provide researchers with the resources they need to collect pilot data and demonstrate that a proposed research project is feasible. This type of funding is aimed at helping those researchers to eventually apply for and secure larger, external grants in the future.

“Competition for research funding is strong. The next generation of research leaders need to be developed with skills and experience that will enable them to be in a strong position to apply for and attract funding.”

Carol Armour, Executive Director, The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research

CREATING IMPACT ACROSS THE BROADER RESEARCH COMMUNITY

WIMR has recognised that attracting and holding on to the next generation of quality researchers is intrinsically linked to getting long term impact in their research into the causes of respiratory and sleep disorders.

“We are investing money and time into a group of researchers at a vulnerable stage in their career. As they go on to apply and receive fellowship positions, they will become the future leaders at the Woolcock. By providing support to our researchers at a time when they most need it, we are more likely to retain to them as staff,” notes Armour.

An important part of WIMR’s strategic plan is to train and develop the next generation of research leaders in sleep and respiratory disorders. As a result, best practice research is being introduced as senior researchers help to train junior researchers.

TRAINING THAT EQUIPS RESEARCHERS FOR FUTURE LEADERSHIP

In a world where every research dollar is precious, those in their early-career across the sector are learning they need more than just scientific nous to attract funding.

Most recently, Woolcock has started to provide media training for their early-career researchers. “We are committed to developing strong researchers that are media ready and can share their research with the world.”

They also seek the input of external researchers in the ongoing training of next generation researchers.

“We look broadly across the research landscape to get the best people involved with training our early-career researchers.”

Carol Armour, Executive Director, The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research

COMBATING THE RISK OF TALENT DRAIN IS AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

While institutes like WIMR are making investments out of their own pockets, they are interested, like many other institutes, in working with philanthropists who understand the higher risk and higher reward nature of early-career investment.



Without investments from philanthropy, institutes such as WIMR face difficult internal funding decisions owing to the competing needs of keeping quality young researchers and continuing to directly support other more established teams.

“There has to be a balance between providing funds to already successful researchers - which is a relatively safe decision, and providing funds to an early-career researcher - which is a perceived riskier strategy,” says Armour.

“This investment is incredibly important because the rewards for the entire research community are substantial. We simply can't lose the next generation of researchers to opportunities overseas.”

Carol Armour, Executive Director, The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research

MORE THAN ONE IMPACT POINT FOR PHILANTHROPISTS

"Some of the most impactful philanthropy happens when funders are willing to invest in those critical leverage points, and in research there are few things more important than investment in the researcher - whether they are early-career or otherwise", says Perpetual's Senior Manager of Philanthropy and Non Profit Services, Jane Richmond. "We encourage our clients to be open to investment in development of researchers and their work rather than just projects because we know what impact that can have."

Armour agrees. “Philanthropy can help the next generation of Australian researchers by enabling them. This could be by sponsoring their research program at the start of their careers and allowing them to achieve results. The impact will be tremendous - our brightest researchers will stay in Australia and be part of the major health discoveries of the future,” notes Armour.

Armour has great conviction in the payback for the investment. “We have young stars who are very keen and want to do well in research but are starving. We have to pick the best and fertilise their growth so that they become Australia’s next research leaders.”