

## Mr Peter Wills AC: Address to the National Prevention Summit

The "Health and Medical Research Strategic Review", (sometimes referred to as the Wills Review) highlighted the investment potential offered by the Australian health and medical research sector, and prompted a new way of thinking for policy makers. The Wills Review, released in 1999, found that Australian health research was a standout performer in international terms but that it risked losing its competitive edge. The review proposed the concept of the 'virtuous cycle' of government, industry and research working together as a guiding principle for future research policy.

Since the Review, funding for research has grown strongly, with corresponding benefits to the Australian community. Access Economics' 2003 report *Exceptional Returns*, estimated medical research as having delivered an eight year gain in life expectancy and improved wellness over the preceding 40 years, worth \$5.4 trillion to Australians. The Australian community is clear in its support for more research. Research Australia 2007 public opinion polling found that over 80% of people believe that the government should continue its commitment to invest strongly in health and medical research.

An emerging issue for the community and government as we face more long-term, chronic disease is prevention. Better preventative health is the best way to stop the cost of healthcare from ballooning, improve our quality of life and ensure an effective and productive workplace. Prevention goes hand in hand with health and medical research. Looking to the future we can see changes in the way communities live and work, new technologies change the social and economic landscapes, and an increasingly complex but connected global world.

As our scientific knowledge increases, emerging technologies raise the prospect of a whole new approach to medicine and to prevention. We are likely to be much more predictive about what happens to whom, and when. Individual tailored treatments that strike at disease before it strikes the patient are now a realistic possibility. Policy makers need to consider the most effective means of delivering health services in this "new age."

To this end, we need to keep the virtuous cycle moving through continued strong and effective research investment. We will also need to strengthen our integration globally: by attracting international investment; developing collaborative partnerships; and developing our capacity to deliver the products of discovery to the consumer. We will need to be smarter at commercialization, take a new approach to risk, and ensure we complement an effective and strongly growing research base. We will also need better translation of medical discoveries into improved health care.

However, to ensure we maximise our investment, we need to have effective governance and leadership arrangements in place. One of the recommendations of the Wills Review was the establishment of key performance indicators and annual reporting against agreed benchmarks. This will help to ensure our valuable research resources are capitalised on effectively and to achieve the maximum benefit to the community.

Meeting the emerging challenges of an ageing population and chronic disease will require a renewed focus on health and the maintenance of a robust and productive workplace. It will require continued government investment in health and medical research, increased collaboration between researchers, major new public funding for shared technology infrastructure, students to take up careers in science and investors and industry to discover the significant growth potential in health research. In addition, it will require an integrated health system which enables effective translation of evidence to practice and assures community access to quality and cost effective health care. This commitment to the virtuous cycle will help prevent illness and promote health for all Australians.

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