

# The balance between peer-reviewed project grants and competitive block grants

(Response to pp. 135-136 of the Discussion paper)

I was puzzled by the argument that it would be a good thing for Australian science if the balance of Commonwealth funding were tilted away from project funding and towards block-funded institutes. It would of course be cheaper to administer than the present arrangement, but surely the whole point is to spend a limited Commonwealth research budget as effectively as possible. No justification is given beyond noting, on page 136, that there is little variation over time in the proportion of project-based research income received by institutions from Commonwealth sources. This infers that the outcome would be the same were there to be a shift to block-funding, but ignores the fact that the actual researchers within that institution who consume these resources at present varies over time, as determined by outside peer review. The advantages of peer review are clearly stated on page 136 of the Discussion Paper. Block funding, in contrast, would lead to the same individuals perennially consuming the funds. While of course cheaper to administer, a shift to more block funding would therefore be a less effective use of limited resources.

By increasing pressure on the already highly stressed project grant system, such a move would effectively close down much individual-driven Australian research. This exists because it has maintained itself through the individuals involved, plus their ideas, surviving peer review in the most competitive system in this country. Such a shift of resources would, at the expense of these people and their work, expand the funds available to researchers who are much less accountable, and whose saving grace is that they conduct their research in a blockfunded institution. Because they do not have to face the same peer review as scientists funded through project grants, their ability to compete with them on merit is never tested.

An example of the consequences of this can be provided from my own field of research, malaria. I enclose a recent short review for the Lancet, a highly regarded international medical journal, which summarises the advances in international understanding of malaria over the last 30 years. Virtually all of Australia's malaria researchers are in two large block-funded groupings, at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne (WEHI), and the Queensland Institute of Medical Research (QIMR) in Brisbane. For the last 25 years they have been combining their resources to try to make a malarial vaccine. Together they have employed up to forty people on this task at the one time, and done a lot of basic work, but their output has not been noted for conceptual advances, or indeed a vaccine. Their first trial on human volunteers, conducted earlier this year, was, by their own assessment, a complete failure. Yet their funding from Commonwealth sources continues at historic levels. Their combined efforts do not rate a mention in the enclosed review, which acknowledges advice to the authors from a virtual Who's Who of international malaria research luminaries.

In contrast, the enclosed Lancet article acknowledges the advances my group, which is small and runs entirely on peer-reviewed grants, has provided to the conceptual understanding of malaria on the international stage. It is indeed the only work from Australia regarded as rating inclusion in this article. Yet we never have more than one or two NH&MRC grants at any one time, and only

one or two staff are supported on these grants, which also cover my salary. Being under the project system, we operate under much more accountable conditions of individual peer review than do researchers in block-funded institutes. The contrast in efficiency this produces was summarised in the first paragraph of this submission.

In addition to the lesson provided by this Lancet review, a telling comparison can be derived by examining the programmes of the last two international conferences on malaria, the latest last year in Japan and the one four years earlier in Thailand. In Thailand both myself and one individual from the large block-funded WEHI/QIMR grouping were asked to give a main presentation, whereas last year in Japan I was the only malaria researcher from Australia invited to speak. I can show copies of these conference programmes to anyone from the Committee who wishes to interview me.

Thus it can be demonstrated that the impact of my small, highly accountable group on the world's malarial stage is at least as great as that of the large WEHI/QIMR group, which is also Commonwealth funded. Moreover, being block funded, this larger group is less accountable, a indicator of which is the much higher level of job security they have than those on project grants, such as those in my small group. Yet your proposal would risk delivering what little funding I can glean from NH&MRC into their hands. I find this scientifically and morally indefensible, and believe that any reasonable informed person would also take this view.

In summary, the outcome of the proposed shift of funding towards block-funded institutes would close down small, demonstrably successful, groups to the advantage of the less accountable big operators in block-funded institutes. I can see no reason why the Committee came out with this suggestion except that the leaders of block-funded institutes have been in a position to lobby Committee members. A scientific or financial rationale is quite lacking.

(signed)

I. A. Clark BVSc (Q'ld) PhD DSc (Lond.)

Principal Research Fellow (NH&MRC)  
Biochemistry and Molecular Biology  
Australian National University

Ph 02.62494363

26/11/97