



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BUSINESS

Rearrangement

SPEECH

Thursday, 7 February 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker O'Dwyer, Kelly, MP

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Ms O'DWYER (Higgins) (15:20): Madam Speaker, I second the suspension of standing orders to shine the light on the government and on their real attitude to health and medical research funding.

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr Champion interjecting—

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Wakefield.

Ms O'DWYER: In this country we have three choices. First, we can provide the right research environment that will encourage talented researchers and innovators who are home-grown, as well as those from overseas, to work in Australia delivering economic benefits to Australia and better health care for Australians.

Mr Champion interjecting—

The SPEAKER: The member for Wakefield will leave the chamber under standing order 94(a).

The member for Wakefield then left the chamber.

Ms O'DWYER: Second, we can bury our head in the sand and pretend that we do not need a plan or additional funding to keep the research sector punching above its weight and globally competitive or, third, we can threaten to cut funding, as the Labor government has done, to the health and medical research sector on a regular basis creating uncertainty and insecurity for jobs and investment.

We can play games with existing funding by freezing and unfreezing funding for such things as the NHMRC grants. We can add layer upon layer of additional red tape to the already significant regulatory burdens, as evidenced by the increased time and money needed to successfully implement a clinical trial in Australia. Sadly, the Labor government has taken this third approach.

It is important to suspend standing orders because, under Labor, universities and medical research institutes have been subjected to waves of funding uncertainty. In the budget last year, the federal government froze research grants from the Australian Research Council because of overly aggressive and short-sighted budget decisions, and played games in the national media with the National Health and Medical Research Council grants. Treasurer Swan could have made realistic budget assumptions and hard decisions around the budget in May, and allowed all in the community to plan accordingly. Instead, he took a 'fingers crossed' approach, as he always does; and, when it became clear again that he had got his figures wrong, our researchers and research institutes spent months focusing on contingency plans and exploring offshore jobs rather than on their research activities. This pattern of continuing uncertainty has reduced Australia's capacity to attract and retain the best and brightest talent internationally.

It is important to suspend standing orders because, despite the fact that in last year's MYEFO the Treasurer finally unfroze those research grants, unfortunately he then proceeded to cut over \$1 billion from the Australian university sector, much of it used to support health and medical research directly or indirectly.

Extraordinarily, the Treasurer's short-sighted decision came in the same month that the Chairman of the CSIRO and 2011 Australian of the Year, Simon McKeon AO, released a consultation paper for the Strategic Review of Health and Medical Research funding, which called for an increase in research funding over the next 10 years of \$2 billion to \$3 billion per annum.

Health and medical research is critical to Australia's future and should be a strategic priority. With a hub of world-class universities and research institutes based in Melbourne, it is particularly critical for Victoria.

We need to suspend standing orders because, importantly, we in Australia are very good at medical research. Thanks to Australian research, we have life-saving innovations such as penicillin, first used as a medicine by the Australian Nobel laureate Howard Florey; the bionic ear; the cervical cancer vaccine; and spray-on skin for burns, to name just a few.

The coalition understand this. There was a fivefold increase in funding committed to health and medical research under the previous, coalition government and under the former health minister, Tony Abbott. We also understand that we need a full-scale assault on the bureaucracy and red tape, which divert time and funding from valuable research and are marring clinical trials. Commercialising research can lead to direct wealth creation and jobs growth. Importantly, it can also reduce spiralling healthcare costs and deliver a higher quality of life. It is a pity that those opposite do not agree.

A coalition government will protect the funding of Australia's medical research. We recognise that funding for medical research is the best long-term investment a government can make in the health of the Australian people and we do not understand why the government will not bring on this vote. Could it be that they are too scared to face the Australian people on these terrible cuts, the cuts they continue to threaten to make, the cuts they continue to deliver, to this very important research sector which is, critically, a pillar of our nation's economy? It is important that we shine a light on the government's record on medical and health research funding, which is why we must suspend standing orders today.