

**THE PEOPLE'S
RESEARCH PROJECT**

Each year Australians invest more than half a billion dollars in health and medical research, and it seems even this is not enough!

A recent public opinion poll by Research Australia (a non-profit organisation dedicated to raising the profile of health and medical research) showed that most Australians not only consider such research to be vital, but also believe that government funding should be increased. Of some surprise is the finding that most Australians are prepared to pay an extra dollar on medical prescriptions provided that it is used for research.

But what do Australians want for their money?

At a recent "talkfest" on setting the agenda for health and medical research, a prominent academic offered the opinion that the public does not care, and that setting research priorities is the business of governments and the scientific community. Although challenged on his view, there is some truth in his assertion. Indeed, the National Health and Medical Research Council Strategic Plan 2003–2006 states that "the research priorities have been identified by Government, Council and major stockholders." Whether a major stockholder is the public is not clear. But, there is another idea.

In his recent essay *Set them free*, Rupert Sheldrake, biologist and science commentator, argues that it is time to ask what the public wants and to address how money is spent according to agendas set by scientists and government bureaucracies. His solution? An experiment: devote one per cent of the annual research budget to "research of real interest to lay people, who pay for all publicly-financed research through taxes."

The People's Research Project! Now there's a challenge for the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Martin B Van Der Weyden

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