

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Our politicians are mostly a pragmatic lot; visions are not their style. However, our Prime Minister had a vision about 3 years ago, which was "to deliver the kind of future that we want" through enactment of four national research priorities (NRPs).

Following his announcement, the NRP fish were away and swimming upstream to spawn. One hatchling is *Promoting and maintaining good health*, which comprised the following priority goals: *A healthy start to life*; *Ageing well, ageing productively*; *Preventive health care*; and *Strengthening Australia's social and economic fabric*. Now, almost 3 years later, the hatchlings are in danger of falling victim to the exhausting bureaucratic currents, and their fate may well be to float downstream into the oceans of irrelevance.

Our research agencies, the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council, are currently working together on the priority goal, *Ageing well, ageing productively*, but despite a plethora of preceding relevant reports, progress is slow.

Ironically, the process to develop Australia's NRPs started in the same month (May 2002) that Elias Zerhouni, the new director of the United States National Institutes of Health (NIH), announced his vision to develop the NIH's road map for the 21st century.

In September 2003, the NIH released details of its turbo-charged plan, "to transform US medical research and speed up the movement of research from bench to bedside". Across the border, Canada has also developed its blueprint for health research and innovation.

And all the while, the bureaucratic carousel in Canberra goes round and round. In February this year, the NRPs' carousel acquired a new operator — a supervisory committee, established some 3 years after the original "vision" was announced!

Apropos this breathtaking languidness, most Australians have every right to know what in the world is going on! After all, ageing waits for no one.

Martin B Van Der Weyden

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