

## Towards gender equity in Australian health and medical research funding

TO THE EDITOR: The attention to ongoing Relative to Opportunity (RTO) concerns by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the openness to trial gender parity initiatives are to be applauded.<sup>1-3</sup> While we await the outcomes of initiatives currently being trialled, there remain scope for continued discussion about RTO policy and an imperative to ensure future refinements reach beyond addressing gender inequities.

The RTO section of the recently closed NHMRC Investigator Grant Scheme provides an opportunity to describe RTO circumstances, beyond those that meet formal career disruption criteria.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not the case across many other grant schemes. This is problematic. As was eloquently described recently, frequent disruptions of shorter duration (ie, < 90 days) may be just as relevant (we would argue, potentially even more impactful than a continuous absence), but would not be captured under current career disruption rules.<sup>4</sup>

Another concern presents when a grant scheme restricts RTO information to a predefined period (eg, the previous ten years only). This ignores known career trajectory patterns. Academic track

records operate in a similar way to a positively performing superannuation fund, whereby one's balance grows through regular contributions and through compounded investment earnings. This means any and all disruptions can have a flow-on effect to direct career contributions for that year, and in the compounded "interest earnings" observed every year thereafter.

Finally, although relevant, all of the above ignores the reality that listing career disruption in any form is potentially risky business. Findings in a 2022 study highlighted ongoing researchers' concerns that listing career disruption may harm rather than improve chances of funding.<sup>5</sup> A declared career disruption may introduce unconscious (or conscious) reviewer bias that brings into question the ability to achieve the proposed research.

So where does this leave us? Removal of the 90-day continuous career disruption criterion and removal of any specific reporting period would allow for inclusion of all career disruptions as deemed important by the applicant. In addition, further research that seeks to better understand and quantify potential reviewer biases towards RTO is needed. It is well recognised that overcoming equity challenges in research will not be easy, but then nothing worth doing ever is.

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