

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

**IN REPLY:** The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) welcomes Hayes and colleagues<sup>1</sup> commentary on its Relative to Opportunity (RTO) policy.<sup>2</sup> Consideration of personal circumstances in peer review of track records is a challenging issue for grant applicants, assessors and NHMRC alike. Applicants vary enormously in their circumstances which can, in turn, affect their research productivity and career trajectory. NHMRC has long believed applicants should have the option to outline any circumstances they wish to be considered. The RTO policy applies to all grant schemes where track record is assessed.

The policy has two components: career disruption (at least 90 days' continuous full- or part-time absence due to pregnancy, illness, or caring responsibilities) and RTO considerations (any other circumstances, including shorter or discontinuous absences, affecting productivity).<sup>2</sup> Assessors are instructed to consider both components in evaluating track records. Career disruptions also extend the period for which publications and other outputs are assessed and the eligibility for

an Emerging Leadership Investigator Grant.

Since 2019, career disruptions have been defined as continuous absences of at least 90 days to distinguish them from normal leave and because it proved difficult to validate claims of multiple short absences. This step aimed to reduce the burden for institutions, applicants and assessors. Similarly, limiting RTO information to a ten-year period recognises the challenges assessors face in adjusting track record scores for career interruptions, especially outside the review period.

In 2021, after sector consultation, NHMRC piloted an expanded approach requiring all Investigator Grant applicants to describe their career context to inform track record assessment.<sup>3</sup> Following positive feedback from applicants and assessors,<sup>4</sup> this approach is being progressively extended to all NHMRC grant schemes involving track record assessment. Normalising consideration of career context may help to reduce the reported risks of listing RTO matters.<sup>5</sup>

No doubt the RTO policy can be further improved — the question is how, without increased burden on applicants and assessors or unintended consequences. The current policy is the outcome of extensive discussion by NHMRC's advisory committees. Consultation

with the sector and other funders will continue as NHMRC monitors the policy's effectiveness to support the fair evaluation of all grant applications. Feedback and suggestions, as presented by Hayes and colleagues, are valuable contributions.

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- 1 Hayes SC, Vagenas D, Janda M. Towards gender equity in Australian health and medical research funding [letter]. *Med J Aust* 2023; 219: 135.
- 2 National Health and Medical Research Council. NHMRC Relative to Opportunity policy — updated. Canberra: NHMRC, 2021. [http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/attachments/relative\\_to\\_opportunity\\_policy0720.pdf](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/attachments/relative_to_opportunity_policy0720.pdf) (viewed Apr 2023).
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- 5 Barnett A, Page K, Dyer C, Cramb S. Meta-research: justifying career disruption in funding applications, a survey of Australian researchers. *eLife* 2022; 11: e76123. ■