

NHMRC funding for primary health care research, 2000–2008

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TO THE EDITOR: Primary health care is the part of the health care system used by most people and contributes substantially to the health of the population. Research conducted in primary health care ensures quality care provided in this sector is underpinned by the best evidence.¹

To build the primary health care research evidence base, the Australian Government has invested around \$135 million in the Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) Strategy since 2000.² The Strategy has supported primary health care research capacity building through Australian university Departments of General Practice and Rural Health. From 2011, this funding will be replaced by competitively funded centres of research excellence in primary health care.²

From 2000 to 2008, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) administered research funding of over \$3.5 billion.³ Using NHMRC data, we found that 1.9% (183/9409) of the total number of grants awarded by the NHMRC were primary health care related (Box).³ Of these, 28% (51) were funded through the PHCRED Strategy, with total funding of \$18.5 million.² About 80% (146) of primary health care grants were

awarded to the university sector and 19% (34) to medical research institutes. There were no apparent trends over this period, reflecting a persistent lack of maturity of primary health care research funding within the NHMRC.

Our findings are similar to those for Canada's premier health research agency. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research has, since its inception in 2000, distributed CA\$20.4 million to primary health care projects. In 2004–2005, less than 1% (\$3.52 million) of the \$516 million spent by the agency on research funding was devoted to primary health care research.⁴

The discipline of primary health care is still evolving and will continue to need infrastructure support to ensure it develops the capacity to provide the best evidence for quality primary health care in Australia. Because of the greater emphasis on primary health care in current health reforms, and with significant changes being implemented in this sector, the need for research in this area at all levels is greater than ever before. We strongly urge the NHMRC to increase their support for primary health care research to provide best evidence for significant improvement in primary health care in Australia.

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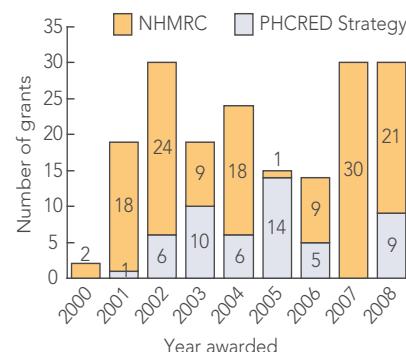
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Australian Government funding sources for primary health care research, 2000–2008*^{2,3}



NHMRC = National Health and Medical Research Council. PHCRED = Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development. PHCRED grants are administered by the NHMRC. * Identified by code and title. Includes all categories of grants and support for personnel.

¹ Yallop JJ, McAvoy BR, Croucher JL, et al on behalf of the CHAT Study Group. Primary health care research — essential but disadvantaged. *Med J Aust* 2006; 185: 118–120.

² Primary Health Care Research and Information Service. PHCRED Strategy. Adelaide: PHCRIS, 2011. <http://www.phcris.org.au/phcred/index.php> (accessed May 2011).

³ National Health and Medical Research Council. NHMRC research funding datasets 1990–2010. Canberra: NHMRC, 2011. <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants/dataset/rmis/index.htm> (accessed May 2011).

⁴ Russell G, Geneau R, Johnston S, et al. Mapping the future of primary healthcare research in Canada: a report to the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation. Ottawa, Ont: CHSRF, 2007. http://www.chsr.ca/migrated/pdf/researchReports/commissionedResearch/mapping_future_report_2007_e.pdf (accessed May 2011). □