

## **SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)**

### **CALL FOR URGENT RESEARCH**

#### **Supporting documentation**

##### **Background**

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC): Urgent research protocol

The NHMRC is the principal funder of medical and public health research in Australia. The NHMRC receives many requests for research to be undertaken in urgent areas. In order to expedite decision-making and other action in cases requiring 'urgent research', the NHMRC agreed to adopt the following definition of urgent research:

*Research that must be undertaken rapidly in response to a threat to public health. The threat may be generalised, or specific to particular groups of individuals, and may be identified as either a current major problem, a potential major problem or a problem which is expected to increase in the future. The main catalysts for urgent research will be the fact that a disease or illness or its variant(s) is previously unknown or unidentified, it has a high morbidity and/or mortality rate, and thus attracts publicity and public and/or government concern about the disease/illness.*

From this definition, the NHMRC developed a process for considering requests for urgent research that involves a risk assessment against the following criteria: immediate threat to public health, potential to spread, population at risk, unfamiliarity with the disease, high morbidity/mortality.

##### **SARS**

SARS is the term being used to describe an atypical pneumonia that was recognised at the end of February 2003. Its spread across the globe since coming to the attention of the World Health Organization (WHO) has attracted much media attention worldwide. The WHO is co-ordinating an international investigation with the assistance of [the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network](#)<sup>1</sup> and is working closely with health authorities in the affected countries to provide epidemiological, clinical and logistical support as required.

Although there have been no confirmed cases of SARS in Australia at this time, it is potentially a major public health threat that requires urgent research as defined above. The NHMRC convened

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<sup>1</sup> The Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network is a technical collaboration of existing institutions and networks who pool resources for the rapid identification, confirmation and response to outbreaks of international importance.

a SARS Expert Group, comprising members of the NHMRC, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and key stakeholders to examine how it could best respond to global research into SARS.

Based on their advice, the NHMRC will fund research to produce and evaluate tests to reliably distinguish between SARS and other viral diseases with 'flu-like symptoms' for national use in Australia. This is the first time that the NHMRC is proposing to fund research under the urgent research protocol.

Applications are called from researchers to develop a research consortium to address the following issues within a three month timeframe:

- Agreed national protocols for culturing the SARS coronavirus
- Validated national protocols for detection of virus by RT-PCR, with positive and negative control materials that are non-infectious
- Validated national protocols for the detection of SARS antibody by ELISA, using non-infectious antigen
- Validated national protocols for detection of SARS antibody by indirect immunofluorescence, using non-infectious target cells
- Other relevant diagnostic tests, if appropriate.

To achieve this the consortium will consult widely with local and overseas experts to ensure that Australia has access to the best and most up-to-date information and to ensure that scientists with new ideas are able to join the consortium.

Members of the research consortium will be able to work on live SARS coronavirus, but only within the National High Security Quarantine Laboratory in Victoria. Non-infectious material can be provided for scientists working outside that facility. All members of the consortium will need to comply with all relevant safety standards and ethical guidelines. Please note: the NHMRC reserves the right to broker collaborations to conduct the proposed research.

Total one-off discretionary funding of up to \$100,000 is available over three months.

Inquiries about the intent and aims of the SARS Urgent Research Project should be directed to Professor Judy Black on (02) 9351 6121. Inquiries regarding administrative issues that have not already been addressed by the supporting documentation should be directed to Mr David Clarkson on (02) 6289 9507 or [david.clarkson@nhmrc.gov.au](mailto:david.clarkson@nhmrc.gov.au).

Applications should be forwarded as directed in the advertisement by **5pm on 14 May 2003**.

### **Application Process**

In order to respond to the urgent nature of the request, the NHMRC has streamlined its administrative processes. The process by which applications for SARS urgent research will be managed is as follows:

- NHMRC to convene a SARS Urgent Research Working Party to assess applications.
- Applicants to arrange for urgent ethics/biosafety clearance to be obtained and forwarded to the NHMRC no later than 5pm 30 May 2003.
- The SARS Urgent Research Working Party to assess and rank applications to join the research consortium on 19 May 2003. The Working Party members will score each application against the following criteria:

1. Relevance and strategic importance in terms of health outcomes
  2. Scientific quality/merit
  3. Qualifications and evidence of experience of investigator/s in use of proposed research techniques
  4. Overall project design, method and feasibility
  5. Strength of the proposed consortium.
  6. Ability to commence and complete the proposed research within the given timeframe.
- The SARS Urgent Research Working Party to make recommendations to the Minister for Health and Ageing for her approval.
  - Funding to be announced when the Minister for Health and Ageing signs approval.
  - Successful and unsuccessful applicants will be advised.
  - Ethics and/or biosafety clearance to be received by NHMRC **no later** than 5pm 30 May 2003.

Successful applicants will need to note:

- Applicants and their institutions are requested to understand that this research is urgent and must take all necessary steps to expedite obtaining the relevant clearances and to ensure that any administrative impediments are removed.
- The research must commence and be completed within the specified timeframe.
- Funding of approved research proposals cannot commence until all required clearances (including ethics) are received, in line with the standard NHMRC grant process.
- Grants are awarded on a one-line basis.
- Proposals that include provision of expertise or equipment by industry or another body, will not be considered for funding unless written agreement to provide these resources is received from this body at the time of application.
- Detailed reporting against the criteria and achievements of milestones as outlined in your proposal will be required, at intervals to be advised.
- The SARS Urgent Research Working Party has the right to undertake site visits or other monitoring, and investigator/s must be willing to participate in these visits, interviews or similar forums.
- The investigators must agree to provide the SARS Urgent Research Working Party with a copy of all conference abstracts or scientific papers, abstracts and articles which result from the research funded by this program, at the time of their acceptance for presentation or publication.
- The NHMRC reserves the right to broker collaborations to conduct the proposed research.

## **Other Issues**

- Researchers will be free to collaborate with, and participate in, international research studies. However, the research should be conducted in Australia, and funding allocated through this program should be spent in Australia.
- Researchers will be free to obtain supplementary research funding from other sources, if necessary, but NHMRC funded research should be identifiable, with the capacity for discrete reporting. This does not exclude expansion of the study using funding from other sources.