

Epidemiological research in Australia: competition, credibility and collaboration

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Funding of health and medical research in Australia suggests that epidemiology is an area of strength. In the five years from 2002 to 2006, 12% (\$298 million) of all new NHMRC funding commitments supported research with an epidemiological or population health focus. While it appears that we've been doing something right in this highly competitive environment, there are signs that we could do better and new opportunities to increase our contribution. Two issues that deserve some debate are our credibility and our record of collaboration.

Our credibility in the scientific and wider community depends on our ability to demonstrate that epidemiology has made, and will continue to make, a substantial contribution to the understanding of disease and the improvement of human health. Initiatives such as the Commonwealth Government's Research Quality Framework (RQF) will place us under greater scrutiny and give us reason to reflect on whether we're doing enough to ensure our work has an impact.

Our reputation with health and medical researchers in other fields, particularly basic science, is often weak, with epidemiology frequently seen as unimportant or easy. As well as being a threat to our ability to access research funds, this perception limits our opportunities to make important contributions in fields dominated by other disciplines. Efforts to enlighten and collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines have the potential to reveal new research questions, change priorities and improve outcomes.