Health security is a strategic focus for Australia but ODA for neglected diseases R&D remains stagnant

In 2017, Australia invested US$23 million in research and development (R&D) for poverty-related and neglected diseases (PRNDs), referred to as ‘global health R&D’ in this profile. This is the same level as in 2016. These figures are based on the G-FINDER survey conducted by Policy Cures Research.

Based on this data, Australia is the eighth-largest public supporter in absolute terms. Malaria (US$13 million, 55% of total funding) and tuberculosis (US$6 million, 24% of funding) are the two biggest disease areas Australia funds. These figures may differ from the trend numbers presented in the chart due to changes in the scope of the G-FINDER survey from year to year.

Health security is an important focus of Australia’s foreign and health R&D policy. To this end, Australia has made health R&D for the Indo-Pacific region (39 countries in the Pacific, South-East and East Asia, South and West Asia, and the African East Coast) a priority. According to its “Health for Development Strategy 2015-2020”, Australia plans to promote “health innovation, and new approaches and solutions that benefit our region” in three areas:

1. innovative approaches and solutions to combat diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis;
2. new ways of doing business, including potential partnerships with the private sector and the use of smart technology; and
3. research and learning relevant to country and regional health program contexts and to answer key operational questions.

Australia’s Foreign Policy White Paper, released in November 2017, mentions health security as essential to human and economic development. Australia also appointed its first-ever Ambassador for Regional Health Security in June 2017. A continuing commitment to health research and development is a part of the government’s emerging diseases commitment, particularly malaria.

The ‘Health Security Initiative for the Indo-Pacific Region’ was launched in October 2017 by Julie Bishop, then minister for foreign affairs, pledging A$300 million (US$230 million) over five years for research into prevention and containment of infectious diseases that have potential to cause “social and economic harms”. This includes A$75 million (US$57 million) for the current round of product development partnership (PDP) funding, including for vector control but not vaccine development. It included a contribution of A$4.5 million (US$3.4 million) to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI).

In June 2016, Australia established a non-ODA funded Centre of Excellence in Infectious Disease Emergency Response Research to “improve Australia’s readiness to respond to future pandemics and other infectious disease emergencies.” In the same year, Australia announced that it would provide A$2 million (US$1.5 million) in ODA over two years to Darwin’s Menzies School of Health Research to advance research into the prevention, detection, and treatment of multi-drug resistant malaria and tuberculosis.

Australia established a domestic A$20 billion (US$15 billion) perpetual fund for academic health research in 2014, the Medical Research Future Fund. Investments will be directed towards areas of ‘national medical importance’, a small proportion of which will be set aside for global health and security challenges. The government intends for the fund to eventually have annual disbursements of A$1 billion (US$766 million). The first disbursements included A$2 million (US$1.5 million) for CEPI (bringing Australia’s total contributions to A$6.5 million, US$5 million) and A$6 million (US$5 million) towards research into antimicrobial resistance.
The Board of the MRFF recommended in October 2018 that the Government establish an Australian Global Health Challenges Research Fund that can leverage contributions from other portfolios, philanthropy, and global health funds to stimulate research that addresses global health and health security issues of relevance to Australia.

The Development Policy Division leads on health policy development within DFAT

Funds to deliver the ‘Health for Development Strategy 2015-2020’ come from country, regional, and global programs, and are delivered through the regular budget process. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s (DFAT’s) investment in global health R&D is expected to focus on the Strategy’s three funding areas outlined above.

The Development Policy Division (DPD) is the driver of health development policy and provides operational guidance to assist with the implementation of this strategy. The DPD also works with other DFAT programs and external partners to plan and adjust pipeline investments. In conjunction with the Department of Health, DFAT works with other key agencies to prepare and respond to health security threats in the region. It also engages with health research funding bodies such as the Australia’s National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) on responding to global health challenges.

NHMRC is the country’s major funder for health and medical research in Australia alongside the growing MRFF. One of its main funding channels, the Northern Australia Tropical Disease Collaborative Research Program, focuses on supporting research into the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of tropical diseases, building strong collaborations and capacity in the health and medical research workforce, and promoting effective translation of this research into health policy and practice. NHMRC cooperates with the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Diseases Preparedness to facilitate effective responses to outbreaks of infectious diseases such as the Zika virus.