

Don't pull rug on research

Young scientific researchers will be hardest hit if the Government cuts \$400 million from health research, **BETTINA ARNDT** writes

This week the Federal Government is poised to make a decision which could strike a blow to the hopes of Australians suffering ill health, now and in the future. A cabinet leak has revealed plans to decrease medical research funding by \$400 million over the next three years. This would mean drastic cut-backs to world-leading medical research programs that have led to discoveries which save lives and improve the well being of patients suffering a wide range of diseases.

Just think of the young women now spared the horrors of cervical cancer due to Ian Frazer's new vaccine. The people all over the world who now hear as a result of the invention of the bionic ear by Graeme Clark. The humidicrib helping keep premature babies alive. The Melbourne breakthroughs in leukaemia treatment leading to 75 per cent of children now being cured. Barry Marshall and Robyn Warren's noble prize winning discoveries of the bacteria causing stomach ulcers and stomach cancer. Evidence of the role of mother's folic acid intake to prevent birth defects like spina bifida. And the men using CPAP who no longer risk death through sleep apnea – to say nothing of the grateful wives spared snoring-induced sleepless nights. There's a long list of discoveries made by Australian medical researchers which have turned night into day for so many ill people.

Australian medical researchers are world renowned, despite the relentless struggle to maintain programs in the face of constant funding pressures. Our most brilliant minds, leaders of medical research programs across the country, already spend much of their time scrounging research dollars by writing grant applications for sparse medical research funds – knowing they have an approximately 20 per cent chance of success.

But it's the young researchers who have most to lose. Here are many of Australia's most gifted young people with just the type of maths/science brains which could set them up for a lucrative career in investment banking. Yet they choose, after eight years-plus of tertiary study, to devote themselves to medical research, earning a pittance compared to what they could rake in elsewhere. And devotion is the right word. Medical research is an



extraordinarily demanding career, requiring countless hours – often over nights and weekends – of methodical, tedious and repetitious experimentation, data analysis, problem solving and trouble shooting.

I've seen it all firsthand, as Patron of LARA, an organisation which

funds research into lymphangiomyomatosis (LAM) a fatal disease of women in their 30s and 40s. Women with LAM die when an unusual smooth muscle cell proliferates and smothers the lungs – sometimes within four years of diagnosis. Pregnancy accelerates the disease, which is why it is often

diagnosed in women with young children. Medical research offers the only hope for these women and in the 16 short years since researchers have been working on LAM, we have seen major breakthroughs with the discovery of the abnormal gene complex causing the disease.

At the Woolcock Institute of

Medical Research in Sydney, researchers have discovered that a protein which in normal people stops lymph vessels multiplying is missing from the lungs of patients with LAM – a finding which could lead to a new treatment for LAM and other cancers which spread via the lymph system. My friends with LAM

need this research. It's their lifeline.

Why would this Government, led by a Prime Minister who boasts of her zeal for education, want to pull the rug out from under these brilliant, hard-working people doing such vital work? The LAM research is just one tiny program in the vast research effort taking place all over Australia, programs which have taken years, even decades to establish. This immense investment is now at risk by this reckless proposed funding cut.

Access Economics has shown that every dollar invested in the Australian health research and development sector returned at least five dollars in national economic development. We all stand to lose if the Gillard Government decides to cripple our medical research industry. That's why protesters are gathering today at rallies in Melbourne Sydney, Adelaide and Canberra. The Canberra rally is to be held at the John Curtin School of Medical Research, Garran Road at 12:30 pm. These rallies are seen as one last chance for the community to protest against this proposed government action.

Many are warning this massive cut will mean the young researchers will most likely lose their jobs. The best will find jobs overseas, in countries which place more value on the abundant intellectual capital they have to offer. But what's to entice future students into this most demanding, unglamorous of careers, when a government sends such a clear signal that universities and research centers, the thinking hub of our society, are such a low priority? The British Government faces a far worse economic situation than Australia yet this government recently announced that they will be investing an additional £775 million (\$A1.26 billion) in medical and science funding. Prime Minister David Cameron explained: "A strong science and research base is crucial . . . which is why despite tough spending decisions we have protected its funding. We have some of the best scientists and facilities in the world and today's announcement will help ensure we continue to be at the cutting edge of life sciences." Australia also has world leading scientists, particularly medical researchers. We can't afford to lose them.

■ Bettina Arndt is a Canberra writer.