

## COMMENT

## MS cure a matter of priority

By contributing to medical research governments can make a crucial difference.

THE word global has had bad press lately. In a world shaken by unsustainable financial practices, one investment still stands out as a winner: global collaborations researching disease prevention and cures. In one critical area, Australian scientists are among the leaders.

One of the community's most devastating chronic illnesses, multiple sclerosis (MS), is high on the agenda in the United States. The Australian Government must also consider pushing it higher on the list of funding priorities as there is an imperative to combat a disease which affects communities and economies.

This will be a year in which recent advances in our understanding of MS could be consolidated into practical and revolutionary help for sufferers. One target is to accelerate development of new treatments for the 2.5 million people with MS and their families. Another goal is a strategy for prevention of MS for susceptible people. If we don't

accelerate investment in research, we delay these vital answers which are now relatively and tantalisingly close to our grasp.

For people with MS – commonly typified by unpredictable attacks of any bodily function – the hardest thing to face can be the uncertainty. How will I be today? Will my employer understand? Will I be able to get the kids to school?

A challenge for Australian health budgets is to provide appropriate care and medications for the 18,000 Australians living with MS. This is darkly underlined by the fact that

incidence of MS is increasing at a rate of 7 per cent each year.

Given the burden of MS – which in Australia in 2005 was estimated by Access Economics to be \$2 billion a year – the Federal Government might consider it worthwhile to make an annual contribution of \$5 million to research. MS Research Australia (MSRA) has even suggested it would aim to match that through donations from private foundations and community fund-raising.

In the US, the National Institute of Health invests more than

\$155 million annually in MS research. This supplements the National MS Society's contribution of \$68 million.

These funds are distributed globally and we even include nearly \$1 million to Australian scientists who have demonstrated their projects' potential for vital discoveries about MS.

A global effort is under way to identify genetic variations influencing MS susceptibility. A landmark study has also shown that immune cells recognising the outer covering of nerves also react to viruses, a potential mechanism by which viruses may trigger MS. Another team has made essential steps for applying stem cells to repair neural damage.

While MSRA brings \$2 million each year to MS research labs, the Federal Government has spent only \$1.5 million on MS-specific research via the Commonwealth research arm, the National Health and Medical Research Council.

MSRA has, in just four years, changed the landscape of MS research. A recent important initiative was to organise the collaboration of 10 research institutes across Australia and New Zealand. They are analysing 2000 DNA samples from people with MS, looking for genes that substantially

contribute to MS susceptibility. And recently a team backed by MSRA funds released a milestone study showing that, for some people, there is a genetic defect in the immune response to the Epstein-Barr virus. This has the potential for being a major contributing factor in developing MS.

A cure for MS will happen and the time it takes will directly relate to the funding spent on research.

So what can, and should, the Australian Government do?

Medical research saves lives and saves dollars. There can be little negative fallout from an investment in curing diseases like MS.

While it is a sense of humanity that is the main thrust, there is economic value in finding solutions for health problems. This is an investment with a virtually certain pay-off for the government, for society and for people with chronic diseases such as MS.

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■ By Invitation Only is a space for people of influence to have their say. Edited by Kerry-Anne Walsh. [kwash@fairfaxmedia.com.au](mailto:kwash@fairfaxmedia.com.au)



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