

# Why the fight to prevent NHMRC cuts is so important - and personal

**Professor Julio Licinio, Director of The John Curtin School of Medical Research, ANU, comments on proposed funding cuts for medical research in Australia.**



My personal life has been entirely shaped by illness and the impact of medical research. The black and white picture above shows my sister Fabíola and I in a park in 1964. At that point she had advanced stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. She died a few weeks after this picture was taken, wearing the same pink frock and holding her favourite doll, seen in the photo. In 1964 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma of childhood was 100% fatal. Now the cure rate is over 80%, thanks to medical research. When Fabíola died I was so upset that it took me decades to recover. From protracted mourning to survivor guilt, the impact of that death shaped my life. For someone like myself who suffered tremendously due to a disease which was incurable and whose cure has been subsequently achieved through medical research, the proposed cuts to the NHRMC budget are unconscionable.

On a very positive note, my mother, Áurea, (Golda, in Portuguese) lost her own mother early on. My grandmother died at age 47 due to malignant hypertension which was out of control and sky high blood pressures. My mother suffered enormously because of that death - and she knew that she had the exact same disease. Her blood pressure could get as high as 240/180 mm Hg (normal is 120/80). Untreated she would have died at the same age as her mother. Later in life, my mother also developed breast cancer. As I was born when she was 39, it is certain that without medical

research, I would have become an orphan very early on. However, medical research always caught up with her and her blood pressure was always well controlled. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer she had state-of-the-art treatment, guided by medical research. My mother, Áurea Licinio, died in 2007 neither from hypertension, nor from breast cancer. Medical research gave my mother forty years of active, happy, and highly-productive life. She raised me very well. The idea that after losing my sister to a now curable disease, I would lose my mother in early childhood if it were not for medical research is almost too much to bear.

Australian medical research has been among the best in the world and contributions originating in Australia have saved or improved lives both here and worldwide. I am the Director of the John Curtin School of Medical Research at The Australian National University (ANU). Created based on the idea of the great Australian scientist Howard Florey, who discovered penicillin and launched the era of antibiotics worldwide (Nobel Prize, 1945), the John Curtin School was the place where three other medical researchers won their Nobel Prizes for seminal discoveries: John Eccles (1963) for his work on nerve cells and Peter Doherty and Rolf Zinkernagel (1996) for their work in immunology.

Importantly, while Director of the John Curtin School, Professor Frank Fenner chaired the Global Commission for the Certification of Smallpox Eradication and announced the eradication of the disease to the World Health Assembly on 8 May 1980. The eradication of smallpox, the world's most pathogenic disease, which caused 500 million deaths in the 20th century alone, is considered by many the most important medical accomplishment in history. At the time of Professor Fenner's death on 22 November 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard, speaking in Parliament, paid tribute saying that Professor Fenner was a man of "exceptional integrity, modesty and generosity of spirit" who "showed that Australians are capable of great things." She subsequently announced that the late Professor Frank Fenner would be honoured with a State Memorial Service. Is this government truly honouring Frank Fenner's memory by drastically cutting the NHMRC budget and thereby making it much harder for the current generation of Australians to "achieve great things," to cure disease and to improve human lives?

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