

Testing times in science

'Brain drain' as female researchers feel squeeze

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AN epidemic sweeping the country's research sector could lead to Australia missing out on crucial health discoveries, medical research institutes say.

Female researchers at senior levels are "dropping like flies" as funding shortfalls and gruelling grant application processes take their toll, according to the Heart Research Institute's Mary Kavurma.

The HRI fears a "brain drain" as health experts quit decades worth of critical research due to lack of funding.

"Without basic science there are no medical breakthroughs, yet today we see a significant decline in funding and support for the researchers," Professor Kavurma said.

While most researchers are affected by funding shortfalls, women in science are at the forefront of the crisis.

From 2019 to 2021, female researchers received about \$400m less than their male counterparts, according to a study by Monash University and St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research.

While funding bodies like the National Health and Medical Research Council have acknowledged the gap and say they are working to close it, for some it is too late.

Belinda Di Bartolo left after 20 years in cardiovascular research because she was unable to get enough funding for her studies. She now works as a chief operations officer for Australasian biotech company Living Cell Technologies.

"You've got to live and die by your next grant," she told

the Herald Sun. "I loved what I was doing ... I dedicated my life and soul to research, but stepping away was the hardest decision and I felt like I'd thrown away 20 years of my life, but without grants you have no research."

Women are more likely to experience funding shortfalls, according to Association of Australian Medical Research Institute chief executive Saraid Billiards.

"Obviously then that's exacerbated even further by

women who may go on to have families and the caring responsibilities that come with that, so it's a double-edged sword," she said.

A former researcher herself, Dr Billiards said a shortfall in funding for female researchers among other minority groups had been an issue for some time, however, cost-of-living pressures and the pandemic had aggravated the matter.

Now a lack of indirect cost funding for some research centres such as The Ritchie

Centre at Hudson Institute of Medical Research in Clayton, southeast Melbourne, meant it was struggling to pay staff.

"We have talented mid-career researchers who have established their careers and are doing fabulous work, making huge progress, and we simply can't get funding for their salaries," said Suzanne Miller, head of The Ritchie Centre.

Dr Billiards said situations like this could potentially cost the country. "You always run the risk that a great idea or a

brilliant discovery is now lost to the system," she said.

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