It was not long ago that there was a widespread perception it was difficult to obtain funding to support physiotherapy research. There is no doubt it remains very competitive, but physiotherapists in Australia are having increasing success in obtaining funding from a range of organisations. The Australian Physiotherapy Association’s Physiotherapy Research Foundation (PRF) has been an important catalyst for change in the profession, making it possible for both new and more experienced researchers to obtain the necessary funding to undertake the preliminary work to build an argument for a larger study and to build a track record in grant funding. Both of these are critical to success in obtaining larger funding from other granting bodies. A recent review by the PRF indicates that 74% of successful applicants received later research funding. This is a clear indication that the PRF is reaping benefits for the profession and is worthy of our continued support.

The track record of physiotherapists in obtaining significant grant funding is on a steep upward trajectory. There are some notable examples of large grants worth several million dollars from organisations such as the Michael J Fox Foundation and Victorian Neurotrauma Foundation to research teams headed by physiotherapists. In Australian, particular prestige surrounds funding from the National Competitive Grant schemes such those from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and Australian Research Council (ARC). On behalf of the Editorial Board of Australian Journal of Physiotherapy I undertook a review of all funding from the NHMRC and ARC that has included one or more physiotherapists as a chief investigator. This review involved data collection and accuracy checking using multiple methods. The complete list of grants from the NHMRC and ARC was obtained from the respective public databases on each organisation’s website. The list was scanned for all known physiotherapists and the NHMRC grant list was checked against a list of grants that has been identified by the NHMRC as related to ‘physiotherapy’ based on the selection of the Research Fields, Courses and Disciplines code for ‘Rehabilitation and Therapy: Occupational and Physical’. The list of grants was then sent to all physiotherapy schools and to all physiotherapists known to be active in research, but not part of a physiotherapy school; these people were to check it and to add any missing grants (see eAddenda for full dataset.)

The data show the success of physiotherapists in gaining research funding. Since 2000, physiotherapists have been chief investigators on grants to the value of $57.5 million dollars ($52.1 million from NHMRC and $5.4 million from the ARC) (Figure 1). The smaller amount of funding from the ARC is explained by the fact that ARC does not provide funding for medical research, although it does fund research related to health. Of the total funding, $52.6 million ($47.5 million from NHMRC and $5.1 million from ARC) has been received (includes grants awarded before 2004, but with funding continuing after 2004) or awarded (includes grants awarded since 2004 with funding continuing up to 2011) since 2004. This means that the substantial funding for physiotherapy research is relatively recent. As a direct result of the recommendations of what is known as the 1999 ‘Wills Report’, total NHMRC funding more than doubled between 1999 and 2004, and since 2000 total NHMRC funding has increased by 251% (from $170 million in 2000 to $595 million in 2008) (Figure 1). During this same period, NHMRC grants to physiotherapist researchers have increased by 2700% (from $0.3 million in 2000 to $9.2 million in 2008), well above the expected trajectory. The grants to physiotherapists extend across most of the major funding types from both organisations including 84 NHMRC grants (Project Grants, Centres of Clinical Research Excellence, Development Grants, New Investigator Grant, Health Services Research Grants, and salary support grants) and 20 ARC grants (Discovery

**Figure 1.** NHMRC funding awarded for grants with one or more physiotherapists as chief investigators, and total funding awarded for period 2000–2008.
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Project Grants, Linkage Grants, and Large Equipment and Infrastructure Grants).

A recent paper published in *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy* argued that limited funding is available to physiotherapists to establish a career in research (Bernhardt and Tang 2008). Although there is no doubt that this is true and the available schemes are extremely competitive, physiotherapists have experienced increasing success in obtaining career funding from the NHMRC and ARC. Since 2000, $8.6 million has been awarded to physiotherapists from people support schemes. Again, most of this funding ($7.2 million) has been awarded since 2004. Funding has been received in the form of 17 PhD scholarships, 17 post-doctoral research fellowships, 5 research fellowships (2 Senior Level A Research Fellowships, 2 Senior Level B Research Fellowships, 1 Principal Research Fellowship), and 2 career development awards, which is the level between a postdoctoral fellowship and a research fellowship. This is a substantial increase from the single PhD scholarship and 2 post-doctoral fellowship holders in 2000. A post-doctoral fellowship was first awarded to a physiotherapist in 1997. Currently there are five physiotherapists receiving post-doctoral support. To complement this increase from National Competitive Grant schemes there has been increased success in obtaining research career support from institutional post-doctoral research fellowship schemes, joint research positions between universities and health departments (Brauer et al 2007) and other examples such as a Nuffield medical fellowship.

There are likely to be many factors contributing to the stellar trajectory of research funding awarded to physiotherapists. It is well known that track record is an important factor for obtaining grant funding. The near exponential growth of funding is likely to be explained partly by the development of funding profiles of researchers in the field, often first as co-investigators and later as principal investigators. There is now a critical mass of research-active physiotherapists in the country. Another issue is the trend to fund research with direct application to clinical practice. The applied relevance of research is highlighted by the success physiotherapists have had in obtaining Linkage Grant support from the ARC. The Linkage Grant scheme funds collaborative research with industry with in-kind and cash support from industry matched with funding from the ARC. Of the funding to physiotherapists from the ARC, 58% ($3.2 million) has been in the form of these grants. Another key aspect has been multidisciplinary collaboration across a range of fields. A final aspect of the physiotherapy success is likely to be the underlying creativity and innovation that is imbedded in the research undertaken by physiotherapists.

In summary, the indicators are there for the increasing success of physiotherapists in the challenging area of grant funding. However, despite the growing level of support, it is still not sufficient to fund all projects and many high quality research projects are failing to obtain funding due to the highly competitive nature of the schemes. We need not only to continue to build on our past strengths to obtain a larger slice of the research funding pie, but also to contribute to the national debate to increase funding. Funding for National grant schemes is reaching a plateau. As highlighted by Warwick Anderson, the Chief Executive Officer of the NHMRC (Anderson, 2005), it is our responsibility as researchers and users of research to convince governments and the community at large of the benefits of our science. In physiotherapy, this is achievable since much of our work has direct implications for healthcare and quality of life. We can all contribute to this task.

eAddendum: Complete list of grants awarded to physiotherapists to 2008 available at AJP.physiotherapy.asn.au

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References