

## **Abridged WAHTN Executive Board Minutes for WAHTN Website Meeting No. 02/2020 held on Wednesday 27 May 2020**

### **Attendees:**

\*Mr Malcolm McCusker AC CVO QC, Chair  
Ms Pip Brennan, Consumer Advocate  
Dr James Williamson, representing the WA Department of Health  
Professor Shirley Bowen, representing the Private Health Sector members  
Professor Peter Leedman, representing the Medical Research Institute members  
Professor Eeva Leinonen, representing the member Universities  
Professor Neale Fong, representing the WA Health Service Boards  
Associate Professor Dan McAullay, representing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people  
\*Professor Gary Geelhoed, Executive Director WAHTN, ex officio

\*Executive Officer: Ms Lauren White, WAHTN

### **By Invitation:**

\*Dr Debbie Turner, Chief Operating Officer, WAHTN  
(All save those marked with asterisk attended by Zoom)

### **1. Welcome**

The Chair welcomed members to the second meeting of 2020.

### **2. Declarations of potential or perceived Conflicts of Interest (COI)**

None declared.

### **3. Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Board 15 January 2020**

It was RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting of the WAHTN Executive Board held on 15 January 2020 were confirmed.

### **4. Management Committee**

The Minutes of the Management Committee meeting held on 4 February 2020 was noted.

The next Management Committee meeting is yet to be scheduled.

### **5. WAHTN COVID-19 Research Collaboration**

The WA Minister for Health and the Department of Health asked the WAHTN to help coordinate research efforts during this extraordinary time of threat to the WA community and the wider world.

#### **5.1     *Guiding and Lessons Learnt Document***

Board members were directed to the document attached to the Agenda, with the lessons learnt summarised as follows:

- The formation of the WAHTN some five years ago was to better coordinate research efforts of hospitals, universities and Medical Research Institutes. This approach has been vindicated by the work of the WAHTN during the COVID-19 crisis.
- The recognition and endorsement of the WAHTN's leadership by the Roger Cook the Minister for Health and the Department of Health was a key factor in engaging with a wide selection of researchers from across the twenty WAHTN partners.

- A call for interested parties to meet via teleconference at short notice resulted in over fifty participants contributing, almost certainly many more than would have met in person.
- The continued success of these weekly meetings with a constantly updated Guiding Document and constantly updated website allowed for coordination, collaboration and a sense of shared purpose.
- A number of existing WAHTN initiatives such as working to set up a WA Virtual biobank and Steering Committee proved invaluable when the need for a coordinated enhanced biobank capacity to meet the COVID-19 crisis was recognised.
- The allocation of infrastructure funding based on system need and with guidance of the weekly meeting bettered prepared WA for the expected great numbers of patients rather than the more traditional call for individual grants.
- A big part of the appeal of large weekly meetings was knowing that funds had been allocated to WAHTN from the WA Department of Health, Lotterywest (although this did not eventuate) and philanthropy and Foundations.
- Widely based groups formed in mental health, emergency medicine, biobanking, immunology due to the focus and threat of COVID-19, the promise of possible funding, a shared sense of purpose and with the neutral leadership of the WAHTN.
- Decisions on funding were based on a worst case scenario such as New York, Italy or the UK. The very successful lockdown in Australia has resulted in relatively few cases. WA however due to the coordinated approach to recruiting has possibly one of Australia's largest databases.
- The investment in a coordinated clinical trials group and biobank will serve WA well after the COVID-19 crisis has past.
- Following on from the success of WAHTN during this crisis the network should be seen as being able to play a prominent role as "honest broker" with the anticipated doubling of WA Research funding in coming years through the Future Health Research and Innovation Fund.

**ACTION ITEM:** Board members noted that WAHTN should evaluate and define how the collaboration came together, what resources were utilised and what aspects we can incorporate into future opportunities.

#### 5.2 *Funding*

A total of \$3M funding has been received from WA Department of Health to progress the COVID-19 Research Collaboration.

The Project Grants were reviewed by a panel chaired by Professor Peter Klinken. As a result of Professor Klinken's involvement, further projects were able to be funded through other Government sources.

Dr James Williamson noted that the WA Department of Health worked very closely with Professor Geelhood to set up a mechanism where Departmental funding could be easily distributed to WAHTN to fund COVID-19 projects.

**ACTION ITEM:** The Board members requested a detailed breakdown of the project grants and infrastructure grants funding outlining the amounts that were distributed.

#### 5.3 *Dedicated WAHTN Website*

A specific COVID-19 Research Collaboration webpage was created on the WAHTN website which provides a transparent view into WAHTN's collaboration efforts including access to relevant documents, meeting outcomes and useful COVID-19 related resources and links.

<https://www.wahtn.org/wa-covid-19-research-collaboration/>

The webpage has continuously been receiving a high volume of traffic and appears to be a useful tool for the community.

5.4 *Media*

A number of COVID-19 related interviews and media articles have been released, as outlined in the Executive Directors' Quarterly Report. Copies and links to these articles can be found on the website (<https://www.wahtn.org/wa-covid-19-research-collaboration/>).

**6. Australian Health Research Alliance (AHRA)**

The AHRA Consumer and Community Involvement Initiative (Phase 2) comprises four projects each being led or co-led by 6 AHRA Centres across Australia. All are now well underway and all but one are on track to be completed by June 2021 as per funder's requirements.

The AHRA National Wounds Initiative comprises 4 Project Streams which are being undertaken by 7 AHRA Centres across Australia. All are underway and will be completed by June 2021 as per the funder's requirements.

WAHTN collaborated with the WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA) to submit a national Wound Care proposal, we are currently awaiting advice on whether or not the submission has been successful.

**7. Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF)**

WAHTN are in discussions with the Commonwealth with regards to potential delays to funded Project Grants due to the COVID-19 crisis. This will be communicated to recipients once a clear way forward is confirmed.

The discussion paper produced by NSW Regional Health Partners and attached to the Agenda for Board members information was noted. It was agreed that the funding approach described in the paper should be given further consideration from a WA perspective.

**8. Governance and Operations**

8.1 *Joint Venture Agreement, Centre Agent Services Agreement*

WAHTN Partners provided amendments to the WAHTN Joint Venture Agreement. All requested changes have been incorporated. The current Agreements conclude in December 2020 and therefore require a revised Agreement to be in place by January 2021.

The revised Agreement is awaiting endorsement from WA Department of Health. It has been with the Department for several months, with delays caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

**ACTION ITEM:** Dr James Williamson confirmed he would follow up on the status of the Joint Venture Agreement with the Legal department at the WA Department of Health.

8.2 *Strategic Review*

Board members noted that this had been delayed due to COVID-19 and agreed that the strategic review process should re-commence and that WAHTN should incorporate the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 Research Collaboration.

8.3 *2020 Partnership Funding*

The 2020 invoices related to partnership funding have been distributed.

#### 8.4 *New Funding Agreements with WA Department of Health*

Board members noted the new Funding Agreements that have been entered into with the WA Department of Health; COVID-19 (\$3M); and Enabling Allied Health Research Capacity (\$236,979).

### 9. Financial Reports

The WAHTN Financial Report was circulated – expenditure is within budget.

### 10. Enabling Platforms

In addition to the Executive Director's Quarterly Report tabled, the following items were discussed in further detail:

- *Research Education and Training Program (RETProgram)*

Strategies for sustainable funding opportunities have been initiated, including:

- Developing a uniform fee structure for student access that will be used to approach all five WA Universities;
- Sourcing bespoke module development opportunities;
- External promotional and marketing exercises to obtain a broader reach (domestic and international);
- Provided all AHRA members and their partner organisations a discount to access the Good Clinical Practice (GCP) course, which had significant uptake; and
- Sourcing an independent review and impact assessment of RETProgram.

- *Australian National Phenome Centre (ANPC)*

Professor Eeva Leinonen thanked WAHTN for their support of the ANPC, particularly with regards to the COVID-19 Research Response Team who have now consented patients across three metropolitan sites (North, South and East) with the testing of the results and subsequent research being pursued rigorously.

The ANPC has significant international connections and due to this, a MoU has recently been signed with the University of Cambridge, School of Medicine, allowing a coordinated metabolic phenotyping research approach.

### 11. Executive Director's Quarterly Report

The Executive Director's Quarterly Report was spoken to by Professor Gary Geelhoed utilising the attachment tabled. The following items were discussed in further detail:

- **Biobanking**

A significant amount of work and COVID-19 Infrastructure funding from the Department of Health has been allocated to progress the WAHTN biobanking initiative. The Biobank will provide a vital service to researchers across the state, including those focussed on COVID-19 research.

The upscaling of the OpenSpecimen software is in progress and will provide researchers throughout WA access to see what samples are being stored in real time, the availability of samples and those tests already performed.

Funding has been secured for 12 months.

- **Guardianship Act**

WAHTN is continuing to assist with coordinating a response to the Guardianship and Administration Amendment (Medical Research) Bill 2020.

## **12. Other Business**

Professor Leedman expressed concern about the very small proportion of Investigator Grants awarded to medical researchers in Western Australia, in comparison to researchers in all other states, including South Australia. WA receives well below half the number that it might reasonably be expected to be granted, on a population basis. He pointed out that this disparity is a disincentive to first class researchers locating in (or remaining in) WA, instead of states such as Victoria, which receives a disproportionately large number of grants, and as a result has superior research facilities and infrastructure.

This will inevitably lead to a lower quality of research and health services in WA unless steps are taken to reverse this alarming disproportion.

The Board members agreed that this is a matter of grave concern, and that WAHTN should seek to enlist the support of WA research bodies in a co-ordinated approach to seek Government assistance.