2027 National Research Program Guidelines

The objectives of the Arthritis Australia National Research Program are to support:

- research projects into arthritis, rheumatic and other musculoskeletal conditions;
- research that includes and responds to meaningful engagement with arthritis consumers; and
- foster the career development of Australian scientists and clinical investigators committed to research into arthritis, rheumatic and other musculoskeletal conditions.

Translational research, an increased emphasis since 2016

Applicants are asked to explain in detail how their project will produce a benefit to health consumers e.g., improve quality of life for patients with arthritis, rheumatic and other musculoskeletal conditions or advance knowledge in clinical areas of therapeutic uncertainty. It is intended that at least one project grant will be allocated specifically to a project with a translational emphasis.

Meaningful consumer engagement, an increased emphasis since 2025

In 2024, Research Australia conducted a comprehensive review of Arthritis Australia's National Research Program to strengthen consumer engagement and promote a consumer-driven approach, ultimately enhancing the impact of arthritis research. The review indicated that the program was highly valued and well regarded within the research sector, highlighting several key areas for improvement.

Guided by principles of diversity, inclusion, accountability, transparency, collaboration, and empowerment, the revised program aims to ensure consumer perspectives influence research priorities, decision-making, and outcomes.

Applicants are asked to provide evidence of meaningful consumer engagement in their projects, which includes documentation of how consumers have shaped or informed project design. This allows the Grants Assessment Committee to assess and prioritise research projects.

Additionally, specific funding to support consumer engagement is to be offered by Arthritis Australia in 2026, with further detail below. This funding is designed to support projects to engage consumers early on in their project design.

Projects eligible for funding

Grants-in-aid: Typically, up to $25,000 per annum for short-term projects with well-defined aims, which can be achieved within a 12-month period. In some cases, grants-in-aid will address questions which complement established programs of research. Only new investigators and those undertaking allied health research are eligible for these grants, excluding physiotherapists unless they meet the criteria of a 'New investigator' (defined as within five years of receiving their PhD). Previous funding from Arthritis Australia and potential overlap with other sources of funding is considered.

Project Grants: Larger amounts of funding (up to $75,000 per annum) for substantial projects which are generally undertaken by experienced researchers to generate important results on their own or to improve the likelihood of achieving government funding.

ARA Research Fund Private Practice Grant: Valued at $40,000 this award is offered biennially. The lead investigator must wish to conduct a research program in private practice. The applicant must be employed in private practice for more than 60% of work time (applicant must provide statement). The applicant must have an academic mentor who is an ARA member. The investigator must be based and conduct the research project in Australia. The research is to be conducted within one year.

ARA Research Fund Ken Muirden Overseas Fellowship: Up to $100,000, this grant is designed to give a rheumatologist who is about to or has completed advanced training in Rheumatology within the last two years an opportunity to undertake further clinical or research training overseas in an approved institution in any country. This fellowship is funded by the Australian Rheumatology Association Research Fund.

ARA Victorian Fellowship: Up to $50,000, this fellowship is designed to support self-development of a trainee/Rheumatologist within Victoria. The purpose of the Award is to encourage Rheumatologists to develop expertise in a clinical or research discipline in Rheumatology and to use that expertise in and for the betterment of Rheumatology in Victoria. Whilst the fellowship may be used for interstate projects, the recipient must be a Victorian trainee or graduate.

Scholarships and Fellowships: Arthritis Australia offers scholarships (up to $50,000) for young science and medical graduates to undertake thesis studies into arthritis and musculoskeletal related disorders at recognised universities. These scholarships provide research training to doctorate or masters level and are designed to develop the intellectual and technical expertise required for a career involving laboratory and/or clinical investigation. Scholarships are intended, in general, to support basic and clinical research training within Australian research units and as a precursor to more advanced study in Australia and overseas. Scholarship awards are for one year.

Research fellowships are available for post-doctoral work or following recently completed rheumatology advanced training. Available for research programs both overseas and in Australia.

The application process – new Expression of Interest (EOI) phase

For Project Grants and Grants-in-aid, applicants are required to complete an online form including details of the research project proposal, planned consumer involvement, budget and chief investigator(s).

Applications will be reviewed by representatives of the Grants Assessment Committee; successful applications will be notified in late June and invited to complete a full application for a Project Grant or Grant-in-aid.

Grants Assessment

The Grants Assessment Committee provides expert review and assessment of the annual applications submitted to Arthritis Australia for research scholarships, fellowships project grants, grants-in-aid and makes recommendations for their funding to the Arthritis Australia Board. Each year, approximately 10 people, including consumer representatives, clinicians and researchers are invited to join the Grants Assessment Committee. Their services are provided voluntarily. Collectively, the committee provides the necessary expertise to rank competing research applications covering a range of research topics within the arthritis and musculoskeletal diseases area.

Grants-in-aid and Project Grants: The Grants Assessment Committee (GAC) functions in a similar way to that of National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) review committees, using the guiding principle of independent peer reviews. Each application is carefully assessed by two spokespersons and other members of the committee, who are all expected to have examined each application.

The grants are examined for the scientific merit of their proposed project, including quality of the research question in addressing unmet need across patient, society and health equity levels. Project feasibility, potential to translate into practice or policy change, and evidence of meaningful consumer engagement are also addressed. Projects that demonstrate high potential in other domains but have not been able to demonstrate meaningful consumer engagement due to factors such as budget limitations or lack of support will still be considered.

The applicant's track record, including experience with techniques to be used, is also weighed in the assessment, but is usually less of a determining factor compared to NHMRC. It is expected that an explicit, justified budget be provided as part of the application. After discussion, the spokesperson proposes an alphabetical score (A to E) with positive and negative notions adding finer grades.

The score is then discussed. The final score is decided by consensus. Generally, grants ranking in the A and B categories are funded, although the grading is such that C ranking grants (especially those in the C+ category) are regarded as fundable and may receive funding in special categories where competition is less intense (most often where a grant is tied to a particular topic or geographical location).

Unfortunately, the competitive nature of the allocation process and the limited availability of funds mean that some worthwhile projects are not funded. Every year, on average, Arthritis Australia funds one third of applications. These are often independent, innovative projects that would not get funding elsewhere, but may provide the start of a new way of thinking about a treatment or disease.

Involvement of active researchers in the Grants Assessment Committee means that occasionally committee members may be directly or indirectly associated with some applications. However, where there is a conflict of interest, the committee members stand aside from all discussion related to those applications.

Scholarships and fellowships: In view of the limited amounts of funding available, a priority is to encourage new researchers who are then subsequently in a stronger position to apply for an award from other agencies, such as NHMRC. Scholarship and fellowship applications are ranked independently in order of merit by all members of the Grants Assessment Committee. Consideration of candidates' experience engaging consumers meaningfully, or their consideration of how they could increase their capabilities to engage consumers into the future will also be considered. The rankings are tabled at the meeting and form the basis for a composite ranking upon which recommendations for funding are based.

Next steps

All applications open on Wednesday, 15 April 2026. The EOI process will run via a web form and all other submissions must be made electronically. Refer to the Arthritis Australia website, for the closing dates for EOI process, scholarships, fellowships and general grant rounds.

The Grants Assessment Committee will meet in September to review all applications and decide allocations for recommendation to the Arthritis Australia Board. The Arthritis Australia Board reviews/approves the GAC recommendations. Formal offers, in writing, are then made to successful candidates in December.

Funding source and guidelines

Donations for the annual research program are received from Arthritis Australia, the ARA Research Fund, State and Territory research-specific fundraising programs; bequests; general donations; and tied grants from businesses and the community for a disease-specific area.

All effort is taken to promote and allocate disease-specific grants. However, if the Grants Assessment Committee believes the applications received are not of appropriate standard, the funds may be allocated to a project deemed to meet Arthritis Australia's objectives and guidelines.

As success in the NHMRC funding program is one of the goals of Arthritis Australia's research strategy, applicants submitting a research proposal which is subsequently awarded NHMRC/MRFF funding in the same calendar year, will no longer be eligible to receive funds from Arthritis Australia for this proposal.

Similarly, recipients cannot hold more than one scholarship or fellowship in any given year and will no longer be eligible to receive funds from Arthritis Australia should they be successful at receiving another fellowship e.g., from the RACP.

The total budget for the Arthritis Australia National Research Program is dictated by the amount of funding which has been raised in the year leading up to the awards.

Funding Source Acknowledgments
All presentations and publications will acknowledge the funding source of the grant.