

Medical workers and students speak against pending spending cuts

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Thousands of researchers, students and supporters came out yesterday against Labor's rumoured cuts to medical research contained within the federal budget next month. Demonstrations were held in Canberra, Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, with many researchers closing laboratories for half the day in order to attend. (See: "Thousands rally against Australian Labor government's spending cuts to medical research")

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended rallies in Sydney and Melbourne. Several researchers spoke about what they thought of Labor's attacks on medical research, and the impacts the cuts would have on their work. Many expressed anger over the Labor government's proposed reduction in the corporate tax rate also contained within the federal budget.

Lily Huschtscha has worked as a medical researcher for 39 years, and studies cancer and ageing. She explained that over the past 20 years it had become increasingly difficult to get a grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and described the implications for the quality of medical research: "The grants normally apply over three years, but a lot of your time is spent worrying about them. If you have a three-year grant, you will work hard for the first year, but the next two years you worry about having a sufficient publication rate in order to get a grant the next time. The publications need to be in the best quality journals. That puts a lot of pressure on you, it is quite intense. It affects your work and you spend a lot of your time writing grants rather than doing experiments."

Asked why she thought the cuts were being proposed, Lily replied: "I think they are just cutting the budget and don't feel that research is important. They are also cutting education. This will have an effect on medical

research, because we need well-educated scientists and the cleverest people to do research. I have friends who are teachers who are finding it tough as well. It's just terrible that they are considering cutting the corporate tax rate at the same time. Australia has one of the lowest research spending to GDP [gross domestic product] ratios in the world."

Paul Anderson is a PhD neuropharmacology student, studying at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. He explained how the already insufficient opportunities available to young researchers entering the field would further decline as a result of the cuts: "I've spent nearly a decade studying. Within three years I finish my PhD. The research I am involved in is attempting to create a model for schizophrenia using animals, which would enable drugs to be tested.

"If I had gone and got a business degree or something else I would be earning over four times what I receive now, which is \$22,000 a year. I have Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts degrees, and I have nearly a PhD in neuroscience. It requires a long-term commitment to my area, and you do it with the presumption that there will be some kind of job at the end. I can pay rent and live cheaply, but if I want to buy a new T-shirt I have to make a choice between that and something else."

Anderson continued: "I'm not surprised that Labor did this. There is only a fractional difference between Labor and Liberal. I think their strong sensibility to the fiscal outlook is something I haven't seen before. I don't think much of Gillard, she's a shrewd politician, all that manoeuvring to take over from Rudd... The Greens seem to want concessions from the government. I don't know what they'd do if they were in power. I think a lot of their views would be toned down."

Prasad, works as a health care researcher at the

University of Sydney, studying the way the human body absorbs drugs. Prasad said he opposed the Australian government's participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which are being escalated as medical funding is cut. "We are killing many people in other countries in the name of the war on terrorism," he said. "We're supposedly helping people but in reality you're creating more trouble—nothing can be achieved through violence..."

"Compared to other developed countries, funding research in Australia is a struggle. Already now, people are planning to leave the country because of the lack of opportunities. So you are already starting from the low base that the Australian government spends on research, and if you cut that, there'll be nothing to do here. Researchers in Australia work very hard, selflessly day and night. They contribute to the benefit of society through their hard work."

Surya Setiyaputra, a postgraduate student, also expressed anger at Labor's attempt to cut research and lower the corporate tax rate. He said: "The NHMRC funding cuts will affect a lot of people—people who will benefit directly from research in Australia, and especially scientists and postgraduate students who are dependent on NHMRC funding to carry out their research and have a job."

"Hopefully these cuts won't be carried out—we need to fight against it. Instead of cuts to areas like health research and education, they should get the money from taxes on the richer companies and individuals. This government represents big money, obviously not the workers."

Stephanie Obeid is an honours student at the University of Sydney. She explained the impact of the cuts for her work: "We research cerebral malaria, which isn't such a big deal in Australia, but it is a major issue in Africa, where it claims about two million lives per year. We're funded by the NHMRC, so these cuts will directly affect our research. In the long-term it's going to affect job opportunities—and obviously the cuts are going to have a direct impact on all the labs that are funded."

She continued: "This is an area of great importance. We're dealing with human lives, so I don't understand why they are looking to cut the budget. If anything, they should be increasing the budget."

Obeid was angered by the government's proposed

corporate tax cut, and the rift that it revealed between Labor's interests and those of the general population. She said, "These corporate tax cuts are pathetic. It just goes to show the morals of society...things are just running on money. But you shouldn't put a price on health. The Gillard government definitely doesn't represent ordinary people. Ordinary people care about healthcare."



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