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## Revolt at research 'fund cut'

THE threat of a \$400 million cut by the federal government to the National Health and Medical Research Council — a move that could trigger a fresh brain drain — has sparked a revolt by the country's top medical researchers.

An alliance of research experts has sent a letter to all federal MPs, arguing that Australia's medical research efforts are improving the health and the wealth of residents, and funding levels need to be maintained.

Julie Campbell, the president of the Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes, said \$400 million was "a figure that's being bandied about" as the potential cut to the NHMRC over three years — equivalent to 19 per cent of the agency's overall budget. While the figure was not being mentioned by official government sources, "no one has denied it, which is a worry", Professor Campbell said.

There have been recent reports citing unnamed government sources that the looming federal budget will be tough, and medical research is one of several areas being seen as a source of possible cuts to help bring the budget back to surplus.

The AAMRI represents 37 medical research institutes that

are not part of universities, including the Garvan Institute in Sydney and the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne.

Other signatories to the letter, being delivered to MPs today, are the Federation of Australian Science and Technological Societies, Research Australia, medical deans of the Group of Eight universities, AusBiotech, and the drug manufacturers' peak body Medicines Australia.

Professor Campbell said while \$400m might be a deliberate exaggeration to make a lesser cut on budget night seem benign by comparison, "any decrease would be totally disastrous".

"Currently, the success rate when you put in for an NHMRC grant is 23 per cent — meaning nearly 80 per cent of researchers miss out on funding for their research projects," Professor Campbell said. "We can't absorb any decrease — it would have a terribly detrimental effect.

"It would send a signal to researchers that there's no career . . . if the success rate falls below 20 per cent, our brightest and best will go overseas."

A spokeswoman for Mental Health Minister Mark Butler declined to confirm or deny the \$400m cut.

**ADAM CRESSWELL**