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Women's Health Strategy  
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Tēnā koe,

## Women's Health Strategy

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is Merck Sharp & Dohme (New Zealand) Limited's consultation response on the Women's Health Strategy. Thank you for the opportunity to provide our views at this early stage of the strategy's development.
- 1.2 Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD) is a multinational research-intensive biopharmaceutical company. We have been operating in this country for over 60 years. Through innovation and scientific excellence, we deliver medicines and vaccines that may help extend and improve the lives of people.
- 1.3 In this response we have chosen to comment, primarily, within our areas of expertise, which includes oncology medicine and cancer control.

**He aha te mea nui o te ao?**

*What is the most important thing in the world?*

**He tāngata! He tāngata! He tāngata!**

*It is the people! It is the people! It is the people!*

## 2. Pae Ora (Healthy Futures) and the Women's Health Strategy

- 2.1 MSD was pleased to see the Pae Ora (Healthy Futures) Act 2022 pass into law. MSD submitted<sup>1</sup> on this legislation during the Bill phase and communicated our support for the intent of the legislation.
- 2.2 Our submission noted that the legislation required the making of a number of health documents for the health system. We were glad to see that the Women's Health Strategy was recommended and included within the Act. We agree that it is critically important that there is a strategy to provide a framework to guide health entities in improving outcomes for women. We are encouraged that the Women's Health Strategy must contain an assessment of the current state of health outcomes for women and, importantly, set out priorities for health services and health sector improvements relating to the health of women.

## 3. Cancer is a significant health issue for women in Aotearoa New Zealand

- 3.1 Cancer is the leading cause of death in New Zealand<sup>2</sup>. By 2040, cancer rates in New Zealand are expected to increase by 40% and cancer deaths by 60%<sup>3</sup>.
- 3.2 In 2020, almost 13,000 women in Aotearoa New Zealand were diagnosed with cancer<sup>4</sup>. This included almost 3500 women who were diagnosed with breast cancer, and nearly 1400 women who were diagnosed with a gynaecological cancer<sup>5</sup>.
- 3.3 The New Zealand Cancer Action Plan 2019-2029 includes a number of actions related to gynaecological cancers. This includes actions related to increasing the uptake of HPV vaccination rates as well as priorities related to expanding cancer screening services and improving access to new cancer medicines<sup>6</sup>.
- 3.4 Despite the stated objectives to improve cancer control efforts, Te Aho o Te Kahu: Cancer Control Agency in a 2021 report noted that cancer screening rates, including for breast and common gynaecological cancers, were significantly below target<sup>7</sup>. Equitable access to cancer medicines is a particular challenge in New Zealand with Te Aho O Te Kahu in a 2022 report confirming that New Zealand is significantly behind Australia in providing access to many cancer treatments, including a number of cancer treatments offering "substantial clinical benefit" against breast and gynaecological cancers<sup>8</sup>.
- 3.5 **MSD advises that:** given the significant and growing issue of cancer for women in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the efforts that are required to respond with a holistic, cross-sector approach to cancer control, including by, for example, expanding access to screening services and innovative cancer treatments, the Women's Health Strategy should include cancer control as a key strategic priority.

#### 4. International Women's Health Strategies recognise the importance of cancer control

- 4.1 The Ministry will be very aware that there are a number of national strategies for women's health that have been published recently. MSD, as a global organisation with a strong base in Aotearoa New Zealand, is also aware of the efforts being put into the improvement of women's health overseas. We have identified below, from our perspective, some good examples from recent women's health strategies which should be considered in the development of New Zealand's strategy.

##### **Australia's National Women's Health Strategy 2020-2030<sup>9</sup>**

This document outlines Australia's national approach to improving health outcomes for all women and girls in Australia. The strategy considers the latest evidence and identifies the current gaps and emerging issues in women's health. Importantly, it aims to inform targeted and coordinated action to address the health needs of women and girls in Australia.

The strategy identifies just five priority areas, with one of those ("Chronic conditions and preventative health") outlining clear actions for the most significant health issues affecting Australian women and girls, including cancer:

*"Increase access to, and promote uptake of, cancer screening and immunisation programs, particularly among identified priority populations*

*"Improve the diagnosis and treatment of cancers predominantly affecting women."<sup>10</sup>*

##### **Scotland's Women's Health Plan 2021-2024<sup>11</sup>**

This plan aims to improve health outcomes and health services for women and girls in Scotland. The plan begins by stating that it is underpinned by an acknowledgement that women face particular health inequities and, in some cases, disadvantages because they are women.

The document is reasonably high-level but still provides, from MSD's perspective, a clear strategic context and plan for improvement.

Cancer, again, is identified as a priority health issue for the health service:

*"Cancer is one of the major causes of death in Scotland; breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women.*

*"Over the next year, there are three areas we will focus improvement activity on: self-sampling in the cervical screening programme; the breast screening programme review; and ongoing work to address inequalities."<sup>12</sup>*

## England's Women's Health Strategy<sup>13</sup>

This strategy details the UK Government's 10-year ambitions and the actions to be taken now to improve the health and wellbeing of women and girls in England.

This strategy also identifies cancer as a priority area for action. The document is detailed and outlines a range of 10-year ambitions, as well as specific actions:

*"Our ambitions are:*

*"All patients have access to the most appropriate treatments and that everyone with a cancer diagnosis gets the personalised support they need before, during and after treatment and beyond."*

*"Ensuring that all patients have access to the best treatments is a strategic priority for the NHS. NHS England has recently commissioned 5 new national clinical audits, via the Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership (HQIP) to help increase consistency in access to treatment and improve outcomes. These are in addition to the 5 existing national clinical audits for cancer. The new audits include a specific audit on ovarian cancer and one on metastatic breast cancer."<sup>14</sup>*

- 4.2 **MSD advises that:** there a number of good examples of women's health strategies from overseas, including those outlined above, which may provide a framework for the development of New Zealand's strategy. It is clear, both from the strategic direction provided by New Zealand's health system documents (see below) and by reviewing similar international documents, that cancer is being prioritised as a health issue for women. MSD would like to see New Zealand's Women's Health Strategy place this same level of emphasis on this significant health issue.

## 5. **Prioritising cancer control efforts within the Women's Health Strategy will align the strategy with other health system documents**

- 5.1 The interim **Government Policy Statement on Health 2022-2024<sup>15</sup>** is the public statement of what the Government expects the health system to deliver and achieve. This document also sets out how success will be measured, monitored, and reported. MSD was pleased to see cancer control efforts included as one of only six objectives identified for the health system:

*Objective 1.4: New Zealanders experience equitable cancer outcomes –*

*"The health sector will work towards New Zealanders having a system that delivers consistent and modern cancer care. This will be achieved through a focus on reducing the number of New Zealanders who develop cancers while also enabling better and equitable cancer survival through delivering improvements to supportive care and end-*

*of-life care. Agencies should design an integrated approach to clinical leadership for cancer care that supports consistency across organisations and enables the sharing of support and best practice”.<sup>16</sup>*

- 5.2 Similarly, the **Interim New Zealand Health Plan 2022**<sup>17</sup> which provides a plan for the delivery of publicly funded health services by Te Whatu Ora and Te Aka Whai Ora prioritises cancer control within its priority actions:

*“Mate pupupuku: People with cancer*

*While cancer survival is improving in Aotearoa, our rate of improvement is slower than in other comparable countries and we risk falling behind.*

*“Cancer is a leading cause of illness and death for Māori, making up 25 percent of preventable deaths for Māori women and 10 percent for Māori men. There are persistent inequities in cancer incidence, mortality and survival rates for Māori with those diagnosed being more likely to be diagnosed at a later stage, more likely to die and die sooner, than non-Māori with cancer.”<sup>18</sup>*

- 5.3 **MSD advises that:** given the clear direction to prioritise cancer control efforts provided by these and other statutory and non-statutory health system documents, in addition to the well documented health need outlined within those documents, we would like to see the achievement of equitable cancer outcomes for wāhine Māori and non-Māori included as a strategic priority within the future Women’s Health Strategy.

## 6. Further information and contact

- 6.1 Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this important mahi at this early stage of the strategy’s development.
- 6.2 We hope our response has been helpful in identifying, from our perspective, what we believe should be included and prioritised within the Women’s Health Strategy. In summary we advise that:
- Cancer is a significant and growing health issue for women in Aotearoa New Zealand and that given the efforts that are required to respond with a holistic and cross-sector approach to cancer control, including by expanding access to screening services and innovative cancer treatments, that the Women’s Health Strategy should include cancer control as a key strategic priority.

- There are a number of good examples of recent women's health strategies from overseas, which may provide a framework for the development of New Zealand's strategy. Those strategies prioritise cancer control efforts, with cancer identified as a strategic priority in all such recent documents reviewed by MSD. Given how significant cancer is as a health issue for New Zealand<sup>19</sup>, and for wāhine Māori and non-Māori, cancer control efforts should be identified within the Women's Health Strategy as priorities for action.
- Given the clear direction provided by various New Zealand Government health plans and strategies to prioritise cancer control efforts, the Women's Health Strategy should also prioritise cancer control efforts for wāhine.

6.3 Should you have any questions or wish to discuss any part of our submission please feel free to contact me at the phone number above.

Ngā mihi,

Jyoti Rauniyar

**Head of Market Access & Policy**

## References

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