



Peer Review Procedures

Meningitis Research Foundation undertakes structured peer review of research applications submitted for funding. This process fulfils the Association of Medical Research Charities' rigorous peer review principles and those of the Irish Medical Research Charities Group. The Foundation has been awarded the AMRC's Certificate of Best Practice in Peer Review for the most recent audit in 2020. Our procedures are outlined below.

1) Application

The dates for each round are circulated to panel members before each round opens. Grant rounds open with a call for **Applications** to the research community, with a deadline of about two months later. Applicants are encouraged during this time to discuss their proposal with MRF's Research Team; these discussions serve to encourage the research that is most relevant to our agreed scope and to discourage ineligible applicants.

Immediately after the deadline, we e-mail Panel members a list of all applications, asking each member to identify which applications s/he would like to be allocated to review in detail, and to suggest suitable **external referees**. We also ask Panel members to identify applications they do not want to be allocated, and any on which they have a **conflict of interest**.

After the deadline and before the Panel meeting we send Panel members:

- all applications,
- any external referee reports received, and
- a table allocating Panel members as first and second discussants, listing referees, and showing referee scores where available

This can be sent to Panel members through e-mail with password protected documents or via online secure depositories.

Panel members are expected to read and **score** all grant applications, or as many as possible, and prepare to discuss in detail those that they have been allocated as lead or second discussant. Inevitably, some referees' reports arrive late, and we send these to Panel members as promptly as possible.

Panel meetings are scheduled for ~two months after the deadline for full applications and then recommendations are shared with Trustees and final decisions made.

2) External referees

Each grant application is sent to a minimum of two external referees, who provide detailed written comments on the application, score it out of 5, and suggest whether it should be funded, using a

standard report form. The form permits referees to raise questions for the applicants to answer before their application is discussed at the Panel meeting, and these questions and answers are sent to Panel members, where possible before the meeting, although occasionally we have to tabulate some of them.

When a Panel member is connected with an application, the application is sent to at least three external referees.

External referees are drawn from a list of several hundred experts around the world, from additional names Panel members suggest in each round, from Pubmed searches, and from names suggested by the applicants themselves. To avoid apparent **conflict of interest**, no applicant in a grants round can referee in that round. Referees are seldom asked to review more than one application in a round.

Due to the potential for conflict of interest, applicants may request that a particular person (or persons) should not be approached to referee their application, and these requests are honoured. Applicants may also suggest particular individuals with specialist knowledge of their field as referees, and such suggestions may be followed. Applicants should only suggest individuals outside their institution who do not collaborate with them in the area of work covered by their application, and should not discuss their research application with anyone they suggest as a potential referee. For reasons of balance, it is unlikely that more than one referee suggested by an applicant would be chosen to review it even if several names are suggested.

Anonymised referee reports are sent to applicants when they are told the result of their application.

3) **Scientific Advisory Panel assessment**

- **Scoring** Panel members read and evaluate each proposal with the help of referee reports, and score proposals with an overall score out of 5 score using the following assessment criteria:

- ▶ Relevance
- ▶ Clinical benefit
- ▶ Design
- ▶ Originality
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Ability of proposers to achieve objectives
- ▶ Probability of completion within time frame
- ▶ Ethical aspects
- ▶ Justification for use of Animals
- ▶ Realism of costings.

Panel members e-mail or phone their scores to us before the meeting so that we can tabulate them. All Panel and Referee scores are anonymised and averaged in a table for the meeting.

• **Scientific Advisory Panel meeting**

- ▶ Screening The scoring system is used to eliminate applications from full debate if they do not reach the standard required or are too preliminary or peripheral to the agreed scope of the call. Before discussion starts, tabulated scores for those applications which have scored an average of less than 3 (and which don't involve a Panel member) are displayed. The Panel normally agrees to reject these without further discussion.

► Discussion Applications with divergent scores, medium/high scores, or which have a Panel member involved are then dealt with in turn. For each application discussed, the anonymised Panel scores, referee scores and average scores are displayed in turn. Those which involve a Panel member but which score less than 3 are rejected without further discussion while that Panel member is absent from the room.

For all applications not screened out, the Panel member acting as first discussant summarises the application and the external referees' reports, and gives his/her view of the application in relation to our assessment criteria. The second discussant then brings up anything else of relevance and gives his/her opinion. After general discussion amongst all Panel members, a decision is made on whether to recommend or reject the proposal.

Once all applications have been discussed, the Panel normally ranks recommended applications on the basis of scientific merit and relevance to the agreed scope of the call to enable the Trustees to approve the most highly ranked studies. This is particularly helpful when the sum represented by recommended applications exceeds funding available for the round.

► Conflict of interest When a Panel member is connected with an application s/he must declare an interest and withdraw from any consideration of that application. We exclude Panel members from considering

- a. their own applications.
- b. applications where they are listed as a co-applicant or collaborator
- c. applications where the applicants or co-applicants are from the same department as the Panel member (but not necessarily the same institution, since a Panel member might have no more involvement with a project at the same institution but a different department than with a project somewhere else entirely).
- d. applications from someone who the Panel member has recently supervised or managed, or closely collaborates with on the same topic.
- e. applications where a Panel member feels they have a conflict of interest.

The member does not receive documents pertaining to that application, learn the identity of its referees or receive referees' reports, and does not score the application or see the scores awarded it by other Panel members. He or she must retire from the meeting when the application is assessed.

Details of discussion of that application are expurgated from copies of the minutes sent to that member. These conditions also apply to the Chair and in the case of the Chair having a conflict, the Vice-chair will take over chairing responsibilities for the relevant parts of the meeting. The Chair should not normally apply for funding, but if the chair applies (directly as principal or co-applicant; or would receive funding as a listed collaborator), he/she must not attend the meeting or appoint referees. In such case the Vice-chair will chair the entire meeting.

5) Formal approval of grants

All the applications recommended by the Scientific Advisory Panel are referred to the charity's Trustees for final decisions and formal approval.

6) Monitoring and progress reports

Panel members also play a crucial role in monitoring the Foundation's active research programme

through the review of interim and final reports. Continued funding for a grant can only be released following the Panel's scrutiny and approval of progress reports. To ensure the timely monitoring of progress, each Panel member is allocated as a lead reviewer on projects corresponding to their area of expertise, guided by the projects on which s/he was lead or second discussant at the application stage. The chair then recommends continuing funding on the basis of the report, considered together with opinions of the expert reviewers.

Many projects will still be underway after Panel members have served their full term of office on the Panel. When this happens, responsibility as reviewer for each active research project will be allocated to 2 current Panel members with the most relevant specialist expertise.

Panel members are also specifically consulted when investigators propose major changes to existing projects, whether in direction, experimental design, or personnel.

7) Role of the Chair and Vice-chair

As well as the duties undertaken by all Panel members, the Chair, has additional responsibilities which the Vice-chair undertakes if the chair is absent or conflicted. For more information on the Terms of Reference for our Scientific Panel, please contact our Research Officer Amelia Slay on amelias@meningitis.org.

8) Other research-related issues

Panel members, particularly the Chair and Vice-chair, provide MRF with general advice on other research-related issues including intellectual property and generally help to promote MRF's research profile.