

AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

7. Finding the funding for research

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Articles in this series have focused on several key processes involved with the development of a sound research study design. One vital component of the research process is gaining sufficient financial support for the research proposed. This article highlights the main sources of research funding and support that are available to Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), and valuable points to note when preparing an application for funding.

There are a variety of funding organisations specifically geared towards clinical research in the UK. In the past, high-profile research councils (such as the Medical Research Council) and charities (such as Diabetes UK) have focused mainly on supporting basic science research and clinical trials in medicine.

Although organisations such as the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust support health research, competition for these grants is fierce, particularly with current trends in basic science leaning heavily towards stem-cell research.

The Department of Health (DoH) awards a high proportion of grants specifically for health research (www.dh.gov.uk) and, since the launch of the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) in April 2006 and the implementation of reforms outlined in Best Research for Best Health,¹ there has been a strong emphasis on supporting leading research for the benefit of the patient and the public.

The creation of this health research system has been endorsed further by the Cooksey Report,² which recognises the role of the NHS in supporting clinical and applied research. These reforms are welcomed, as the NIHR's remit for

research support includes vital health service and public health research.

The Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) programme is a funding stream that supports research throughout the UK. The programme has an annual budget of £25 million and consists of ten regional commissioning panels that commission local health service research. This programme aims not only to support innovation and developments in health care, but to also encourage studies related to practice that are identified by NHS staff.

This scheme makes a refreshing change from the traditional funding mechanisms, in that it expects the research to be based in an NHS setting and be concerned with the direct impact that the research may have on potentially changing practice. The programme also welcomes applications that involve collaboration between the NHS and local universities, therefore encouraging the development of links between primary care and academic settings.

With this in mind, the bridging of research between the NHS, universities and industry is supported by Clinical Research Networks (CRNs) across the country. The CRNs are dedicated to supporting everyone involved with research in the primary care setting by providing research support to individual

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researchers and to research groups. These often involve research consultations and training courses, giving members access to free expert advice throughout the development of the research project. They may also provide help with patient recruitment, as they will be in contact with several research groups and clinics in the local area, thus forging new collaborations between research groups.

Along with this support, CRNs provide training sessions on how to apply for funding and will have the most up-to-date information about research funding organisations. There are so many that the decision on which one to target can be daunting. Therefore, consulting a local CRN about sources of funding available for specific projects is recommended.

Although the Internet makes searching for funding a little easier, there are many organisations that support specific types of research, therefore the coordination of these organisations would be helpful to researchers. To this end the UK Clinical Research Collaboration (UKCRC) has been set up to provide a forum to facilitate coordination between funding bodies in specific areas to maximise opportunities in health research in the UK.

It is currently mapping a profile of health research being conducted in the UK with the aim of informing the direction for funding in future health research. A recent draft report of the UKCRC Sub Committee for Nurses in Clinical Research has stated that the UKCRC will be allocating some funds to support masters, doctorate (including professional doctorate), post doctorate and senior investigator research.

Although this consultation refers to the nursing profession; it is expected that this will be expanded to include AHPs, or a separate AHP scheme may be introduced.

APPLYING FOR FUNDING

Once the researcher has made a confident decision about which organisation to target for funding, the next stage is to write a grant application. With the competition for grants so fierce, the precision and clarity of the application is essential. The decision to award a grant is made by an expert review panel, which evaluates all grant applications according to predetermined criteria. These criteria are often given with guidelines to applicants and are unique to that funding organisation.

Returning to the Internet, it is always worthwhile visiting the websites of funding bodies to get a feel for which one would be suitable for your project. The websites often provide annual reports on the projects currently being funded. Due to the dynamic

nature of health research, funding bodies tend to shift their research interests, so it is always wise to keep up to date with current trends. The website RDInfo (www.rdinfo.org.uk) holds an extensive list of links and portals to national and international funding organisations. A list of helpful web based resources is also provided at the end of this article.

A good proposal stems from a research idea that makes the reviewers think: 'Yes of course! Why didn't I think of that?' A project proposal needs to be detailed enough for the readers to understand exactly what the study hopes to achieve and why. It is important to clearly describe the questions that the project will aim to answer. It must highlight whether the project is being conducted by investigators with the necessary expertise to achieve the objectives described.

“applying for a research grant involves time and careful planning”

The process of writing the application often helps the researchers to identify what activities, instruments and collaborations are required for the success of the study. These points should be included in the application and will aid in the development of a robust study protocol. The reporting of any preparatory work in the field will add strength to the application. This demonstrates good planning and commitment to the project, thereby increasing the potential for success. Sorting out this information at the beginning will help clear thinking and organisation.

WRITING THE PROPOSAL

The introduction

Although the reviewers may have a broad expertise and knowledge of research methods, they may not be over familiar with the specific proposal area. Therefore, the introduction should set the scene for the context of the research. It should demonstrate imaginatively, but logically, that there is a gap in the knowledge, and explain how the study will contribute towards filling that gap. A clear definition of the research question, any hypotheses that will be tested and a clear description of the aims and objectives will help to achieve this.

The Methods section

This section must be explicit in describing precisely how the study will be

conducted. Skill and judgement is required to know what to include as all application forms have a word limit. If well-known methods are going to be used, a single reference is sufficient in place of a full description of the method design. The opposite is the case if relatively new methods are to be used. If volunteers are required, recruitment policies, and inclusion and exclusion criteria must be given. A brief description of the evaluation and dissemination of the results must also be provided.

Successful applications are usually composed of a well-defined problem followed by a clear and yet simply stated method, therefore demonstrating that the author has not only defined a valid question but also knows how to investigate it. Detail and referencing are important throughout the grant application. No changes can be made to the protocol after acceptance by the grant review panel.

The costs section

The cost of a project must be a realistic one that will allow for the timely completion of the project. There are additional expenses other than equipment costs such as staff salaries (including pension and national insurance), pay increases, administration assistance, stationery and attendance at conferences and meetings. Every item no matter how small should be included here as it will not be possible to add to this later.

The first decision that needs to be made by the chief investigator is whether or not the project will be conducted as part of the daily employment. Being a part-time researcher in a clinical post can be a challenging situation to manage and might need careful consideration as to whether the project should be carried out on a full-time basis. If this is the case it may be useful to look for grants that will provide a full salary for the duration of the proposed project.

If specific equipment is needed for the project, its availability within the institute in which the study will be based needs to be considered. Any equipment that needs to be purchased or hired should be included in the costs section of the application. If the study is to be conducted across multiple sites, travel costs should be included. It is often advantageous to state the sites involved with the research, particularly if they are well known for their expertise in a particular field of research.

The curriculum vitae (CV)

The CV should give information about the chief investigator and include a list of academic publications. This will show whether the researcher is capable of

IS IT IMPORTANT?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What is the research question?● Does this fill a gap in knowledge?● How important is the proposed study to advancing knowledge and understanding in clinical practice?● Does it address the key challenges in the profession?● Who will be the target audience for the results?
CAN IT BE DONE?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Are the concepts realistic?● Are the aims realistic?● What equipment will be needed?● Who is involved with the study?● Is the researcher capable of carrying out the work?● Can it be done in the specified time?
ARE THE COSTS REALISTIC?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What type of costs will be involved?
WHAT ARE THE BROADER IMPACTS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● How well does the project enhance discovery and understanding?● What will be the potential benefit of this project to society?● How will the results be disseminated to the target audience?● Will the results of the project be useful in other institutions other than the one where the study has been conducted?● Does the project have the potential to lead to the development of a product that will have commercial value?● Are the plans for developing and distributing any products appropriate and pragmatic?

carrying out the proposed research project. If there is an obvious lack of experience, providing details of collaborators with the relevant knowledge and experience is essential. Without this evidence it is likely that the proposal will be rejected.

Internal scrutiny

The process of writing a grant application is time consuming. You must view the application from all angles and attempt to critique the proposal as the reviewers would. If the criteria for the funding bid are available, you must be assured that the content of the proposal matches the funding organisation's requirements.

Once the application is complete it is a valuable exercise to subject it to internal scrutiny (i.e. internal peer review) before it is sent to external reviewers. If the application is not successful, the time will not necessarily have been wasted as the core information that comprises a proposal can be used for other funding applications.

QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED BY GRANT REVIEW PANELS

When writing an application for a grant it is helpful to consider the types of questions

that a review panel might ask. The table above shows examples of the broad range of questions that may be asked.

SUMMARY

The process of applying for a research grant involves time and careful planning. Before attempting to write the proposal, research and target those organisations with an interest in the proposed research study. The grant application must be clear and concise, describing how the outcomes of the research will add to the existing body of knowledge and benefit the community. This will help to put the project into perspective and provide a realistic view of the time and costs involved.

The internal peer-review process will ultimately help refine the proposal in preparation for submission to the chosen funding body. It is helpful to discuss your ideas with colleagues and seek expert opinions when necessary in order to feel confident about your research design.

WEB-BASED RESOURCES

1. Best Research for Best Health: A new national health research strategy. www.dh.gov.uk

2. Department of Trade and Industry. www.dti.gov.uk
3. External Research Sponsors. www.keele.ac.uk/research
4. Higher Education and Research Opportunities. www.hero.ac.uk
5. Medical Research Council. www.mrc.ac.uk
6. RDFunding. www.rdinfo.org.uk
7. ResearchResearch.com www.researchresearch.com
8. The Wellcome Trust. www.wellcome.ac.uk
9. The NHS Health Technology Assessment Programme. www.hta.nhsweb.nhs.uk

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2. Department of Health, *Sir David Cooksey's Review of UK Health Research*. December 2006, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/pre_budget_report/prebud_pbr06/other_docs/prebud_pbr06_odcooksey.cfm