

# Scientific Advisory Committee

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The Rebecca L Cooper Medical Research Foundation (*"The Foundation"*) appoints a Scientific Advisory Committee (*"SAC"*) to review grant applications for the purpose of assisting the directors to make grant allocation decisions. This document sets out important information for committee members relating to:

- the structure and membership of the SAC;
- the roles and responsibilities of committee members; and
- the process of grant assessment and allocation.

## Structure and Membership of the SAC

### Chairperson

A director of the Foundation with experience in academia and research, the Chairperson (*"Chair"*) oversees the peer review process. The primary duties of the Chair are to ensure that the process of peer review is managed in accordance with the guidelines outlined in this document, and where appropriate, to facilitate discussion of the applications for the purpose of preparing a final ranked list of applicants to be reviewed by the directors of the Foundation.

### Heads of Review

For each of the Foundation's nominated areas of funding support, a Head of Review with relevant expertise is appointed:

- to advise the Foundation on matters pertaining to the applications within his/her area of expertise;
- to source experts within his/her field of expertise to join the SAC to review applications; and
- to provide advice to the Foundation on its granting- and research-related activities.

### SAC members

SAC members (*"reviewers"*) are experienced researchers with expertise relevant to the applications they are allocated to review. The Foundation aspires to balance representation on the SAC with respect to:

- administering institutions;
- state and territory; and
- gender.

SAC members are assigned to review a maximum of ten Project Grant applications that are approximately four A4 pages in length.

Any SAC member who serves on the committee for three consecutive years will be provided at least one 'rest year' before being invited again.

## Granting Process Overview

1. Receipt and processing of applications.
2. Heads of Review nominate members to join SAC.
3. Invitation sent to potential SAC members.
4. SAC formed and members nominate any conflicts of interest (“COI”) they may have with applicants.
5. Applications are allocated to SAC members for review, with care taken to minimise COIs.
6. Six week review period.
7. Standardisation and ranking of scores by the Foundation’s Executive Officer.
8. Funding allocation meeting (directors and Chair of SAC to attend).
9. Announcement of Project Grant recipients.

## Peer Review Guidelines

The Foundation has based these guidelines on the guidelines set by the NHMRC in its publication titled “*A guide to NHMRC peer review*”. These guidelines contain important information about the standards and best practice for the conduct of peer review.

The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research describes peer review as the impartial and independent assessment of research by others working in the same or a related field. In the context of funding research grant applications, peer review involves the assessment of scientific or technical merit of applications by individuals (peers) with knowledge and expertise appropriate for the applications they are reviewing.

It is expected that SAC members:

- are fair and timely in their review;
- act in confidence and do not disclose the content or outcome of any process in which they are involved;
- declare all COIs, do not permit personal prejudice to influence the peer review;
- process, and do not introduce considerations that are not relevant to the review criteria;
- do not take undue or calculated advantage of knowledge obtained during the peer review process;
- ensure that they are informed about, and comply with, the criteria to be applied;
- do not agree to participate in peer review outside their area of expertise;
- give proper consideration to research *that challenges or changes accepted ways of thinking*; and;
- make themselves aware of relevant policies and procedures, prior to their involvement in the review process.

## Principles of Peer Review

The Principles of Peer Review outlined by the NHMRC adopted by the Foundation include:

### 1. Fairness

Peer review processes are designed to ensure that peer review is fair and seen to be fair by all involved. Peer review participants have an obligation to ensure that each application is judged consistently and objectively on its own merits, against assessment criteria. Peer reviewers must be fair and impartial and not introduce irrelevant issues into consideration.

Applications will be subject to scrutiny and evaluation by individuals who have appropriate

knowledge of the fields covered in the application. Peer reviewers should ensure that their assessments are accurate and honest, and that all claims are capable of being verified.

### *2. Transparency*

Key dates and all relevant material, guidelines, guides to applicants and grant announcements will be published on the Foundation's website. The Foundation will publicly recognise the contribution of participants in the peer review process on its website.

### *3. Independence*

The SAC Chair is independent and not involved in the peer review of any application. The Chair acts to ensure that the Foundation's processes are followed including adherence to the guidelines set out in this document.

### *4. Appropriateness and Balance*

The FAC is balanced to ensure that reviewers have appropriate experience and expertise to review applications; the SAC is representative of gender, geography and institutions; and that COIs are minimised.

### *5. Research Community Participation*

Persons who have relevant expertise are asked to participate in the peer review process, when possible.

### *6. Confidentiality*

All participants involved in the peer review process act in confidence and do not disclose any matter regarding applications under review to people who are not part of the process. The Foundation will endeavour to protect the identity of SAC members during the assessment process, unless required to release such information by relevant legislation. When this occurs, it will be done so following discussion with the individuals concerned. Following the assessment process, a list of SAC members will be published on the Foundation's website.

### *7. Impartiality*

SAC members declare all interests and matters that may, or may not be perceived to affect his/her judgement on particular applications. The SAC Chair manages COIs to ensure that no one with a significant COIs is involved in decision making of relevant applications.

### *8. Quality and Excellence*

The Foundation strives to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its processes and endeavours to minimise the workload of SAC members.

### *9. Integrity*

SAC members are to exemplify integrity in all involvement with the peer review process and must act in good faith in the best interests of the Foundation and the research community for a proper purpose. This includes, but is not limited to the maintenance of absolute confidentiality and thus, abstaining from improper use of their involvement (or information obtained from their involvement) to gain an advantage for themselves or any person, or to cause detriment to the Foundation.

## **Contact with Applicants**

Applicants must not contact SAC members in relation to the review process. Such contact must be reported to the Chair, who may exclude their applications from further consideration. Similarly, people directly engaged with the peer review of an application must not contact applicants.

## Conflicts of Interest (COIs)

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) defines a COIs as arising "...in any situation where *personal, financial or other interest has the potential to compromise, or have the appearance of compromising, professional judgement and the ability to make unbiased decisions...*".

A COI arises in any situation in which a participant in a peer review process has an interest which may influence, or be perceived to influence his/her assessment of an application. The perception of a COI is as important as any actual COI. The Foundation is committed to ensuring that COI are dealt with consistently, transparently and with rigour.

The peer review process requires applications to be reviewed by people with expertise in that particular field. This is a privilege which carries an obligation on the part of reviewers to act in good faith, in an open and sensible manner and in accordance with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and the Commonwealth Grant Guidelines and best practice in peer review.

The perception that a COI exists is also a serious matter and raises concerns about the integrity of individuals or the management practices of the institution. Researchers frequently have a COI that cannot be avoided. Decision making processes in research often need expert advice, and the pool of experts in a field can be so small that all the experts have some link with the matter under decision. An individual researcher should therefore expect to be conflicted from time to time and be ready to acknowledge the COIs and make disclosures as appropriate.

COIs may fall into the broad domains of:

- involvement with the application under review
- collaborations
- working relationships
- professional relationships and interest
- social relationships or interests
- teaching or supervisory relationships
- financial relationships or interests
- other interests or relationships

### *Managing COIs*

SAC members will be asked to declare any actual or perceived COIs. If an individual thinks that he/she may have a COIs with an application, sufficient detail about the nature of the (perceived) COI should be provided to enable the Foundation to promptly assess each case.

### *Failure to Declare COIs*

Failure to declare a COI will result in termination of the appointment to the SAC for the relevant committee member.

### *Potential COI Situations*

The following *Conflict of Interest Situations* table outlines matters that may need to be considered when deciding where potential conflicts lie and provides some examples of specific situations where COIs in the peer review process apply.

The table is intended to be for guidance only. It is representative of COIs situations rather than definitive, as each situation is different and needs to be considered on its merits. The table is provided to assist SAC members in identifying the types of circumstances in which COIs might arise,

but is not intended to be a checklist.

Situation	Explanation and Examples	Conflict level*
Contribution to the application under review	<p>You are a named participant on the application under review</p> <p>You have had discussions/input into the study design or research proposal of this application</p>	<p>High</p> <p>High</p>
Collaborations	<p>You have actively collaborated on publications (co-authorship), pending applications, existing Foundation or other grants</p> <p>You have an indirect collaboration e.g. collaborating co-worker, member of a research or discussion group, co-author of a large multi-author paper where involvement was minimal, provided cells/animals etc. to applicants without financial gain or exchange</p> <p>You are planning, or have been approached to be involved in a future grant application or other future collaborative relationship with this applicant(s)</p>	<p>High</p> <p>Obtain ruling</p> <p>Obtain ruling</p>
Working relationship	<p>You have the same employer or are part of the same organisation</p> <p>You are working in the same department (or equivalent) within an organisation</p> <p>You work in the same locality but for a different organisation</p>	<p>Usually high</p> <p>High</p> <p>Obtain ruling</p>

Professional relationships and Interests	You are also a member of the same scientific advisory committee, review board, exam board, trial committee etc.	Obtain ruling
	You or your organisation are affiliated with the applicant's organisation	Obtain ruling
	You or your organisation is affiliated or associated with organisations such as pharmaceutical companies etc.	Obtain ruling
Social relationship and/or Interests	There is a personal/social relationship between you, your partner or other member of your family and the applicant	Usually high
	You have a personal / social relationship with the applicant's partner or other member of their family	Usually high
Teaching or supervisory relationship	For either undergraduate or postgraduate studies, you have taught or supervised the applicant; you co-supervised the applicant; your own research was supervised by the applicant	High
Financial interest in the Application	You have an associated patent pending; supply goods and services; improved access to facilities; provide cells/animals or similar to the applicant	Usually high
	You receive research funding or other support from a company and the research to be reviewed may impact upon the company	Usually high
Other interests or situations	You have a previous or pending dispute (may require consideration of events earlier than the last five years)	High

\*The Foundation will exercise judgement when deciding the level of conflict

## Assessment Guidelines

Please familiarise yourself with [2020 Project Grant Application Guidelines](#) on our website prior to reviewing applications.

You are to give each application an integrated single score out of 100. In arriving at this score consideration should be given to three weighted criteria:

1. **Significance and/or Innovation (40%)** – Assesses the impact of the proposed research on knowledge or treatment approaches in the nominated field of research; and/or how innovative the research is in concept or approach.
2. **Feasibility (40%)** – Assesses the likelihood that the applicant will achieve what they are setting out to do and will depend on:
  - the research design/preliminary data to suggest likelihood of success
  - the applicant’s capabilities and experience
  - selection of a mentor with appropriate capabilities and experience to help the researcher achieve success
3. **Track Record (20%)** – Assesses the applicant’s experience, knowledge, achievements and productivity to date, with respect to its relevance for the proposed research.

## FAQ

### ***Is it acceptable to apply for funding for research assistants in circumstances where staff are engaged on short- term contracts?***

Yes, we base our policy on the NHMRC’s [Direct Costs of Research Principles](#). Examples of acceptable uses of funding under this policy include purchase of equipment and consumables; medical diagnosis costs such as (e.g. MRI, genotyping, biochemical analysis); specialised computing required to meet the project needs; and employment of a research assistant engaged on a short- term contract.

### ***What am I to consider when reviewing Current Research Support***

Current Research Support is a measure of the overall success of the applicant.

### ***How do I assess an incomplete application?***

The application must be judged on what was given to ensure that we are not influencing the process.