

# PEER REVIEW NOTES

## January 2007

### Happy New Year From CSR Staff



“Heartfelt thanks go to our reviewers who gave so much in 2006, helping NIH find and fund the best researchers. Countless sacrifices were made to review applications, attend meetings, participate in pilots to advance new electronic review platforms, and comply with new

reimbursement procedures. We are humbled by your generosity and dedicated service to NIH, the scientific community and others. We wish you, your families and colleagues all the best in 2007. And we look forward to working with you as we seek to enhance the vitality of our peer reviews.” Toni Scarpa, CSR Director.

***New Year Brings Renewed Commitment from the NIH Director:*** Dr. Elias Zerhouni has always been a great supporter and partner in our efforts to enhance the NIH peer review system. This year, however, this commitment was formalized with the addition of two new elements in his official performance plan. It calls on him to advance efforts to “Optimize the Peer Review Process”—including those to address recommendations to reduce the size of the NIH grant application—and to “Shorten the Review Cycle” in order to reduce burdens on both reviewers and applicants and to enhance the quality and efficiency of the overall peer review process.

### CSR to Host the First of Six Open Houses to Improve Application Reviews

Starting March 2, 2007, CSR will convene the first of six 1-day Open House Workshops to gather input from leaders of the scientific community and others on the alignment of our review groups. This first Open House will focus on CSR’s 20 neuroscience study sections. Five additional Open Houses will be convened every other month during 2007 to assess additional groups of CSR study sections. Comments from each of these workshops will be posted online, and all those interested will be encouraged to submit additional input for consideration and action. Visit our Open House Workshop Web page for more information, a revised schedule and online registration: <http://www.csr.nih.gov/openhouse>.

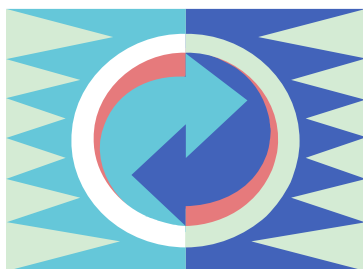
### Reviewers and Applicants Favor Shorter Applications



We’re doing away with all this paper, but applications are still large.

This past November, NIH asked the community for feedback on the possibility of reducing the 25-page limit for the Research Plan of the R01 grant application. Many reviewers and applicants have suggested that shorter applications could reduce their burdens and better focus reviews on the significance of the proposed research. We received over 5,000 responses from applicants and reviewers. About three-quarters of both applicants and reviewers favored shorter applications. In evaluating the data and comments, a trans-NIH committee will investigate a number of issues, such as whether clinical and nonclinical investigators are of the same opinion or not. A full report will be posted online as soon as possible.

## NIH Expands Shortening the Review Cycle Pilot



In two review cycles, the shortening the review cycle pilot included ~1,200 new investigator R01 applications that were reviewed in 40 study sections. The compressed review cycle allowed those wishing to resubmit to do so for the very next review cycle, saving four months. More than 13% of those eligible used this option. The main goal of this pilot is to test the feasibility of providing this opportunity to all applications reviewed by CSR.

**How well did they fare?** 30% of the pilot R01 resubmitters received new scores that fell below the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile, compared to 16% of non-pilot new investigators. Data collection and analysis is ongoing.

**The pilot is being expanded to include all new investigator R01 applications during 2007**, according to a schedule provided in a recent notice about the expansion published in the NIH Guide: <http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-07-034.html>. More than 60 study sections will participate by this February, and CSR plans to involve all study sections by the end of the year.

**Evaluation:** A trans-NIH committee is conducting surveys of key NIH stakeholders to ascertain perceived success and problems and is analyzing the application data to improve the process.

## Reviewer Suggestions Will Save NIH Over \$10 Million a Year



Many reviewers told us NIH could save a lot of money if they received nonrefundable airline tickets instead of the refundable tickets usually given for travel to review meetings. So last year, we initiated a pilot study using nonrefundable tickets. Reviewers in the pilot are allowed to make one flight change per trip, with NIH covering the resulting penalty or extra fare. The savings have been dramatic: NIH saved \$5.2 million between June and December 2006, even after paying fees associated with flight changes. We will conduct a consumer satisfaction survey soon and hope to expand this practice and save more than \$10 million a year.

## Update: NIH Peer Review Advisory Committee

The NIH Peer Review Advisory Committee met Dec. 4 to discuss new ways to improve NIH review efforts and operations. PowerPoint presentations from the meeting are available via the PRAC Web site: <http://grants2.nih.gov/grants/peer/prac/index.htm>. Some of the key issues discussed include the following:

**Ranking vs. scoring paradigm-shifting applications:** Dr. Ken Dill from UCSF explained how ranking applications would be a more successful way to identify paradigm-shifting applications. PRAC members moved to endorse a pilot study.

**Shorter review cycle for all new investigator R01s.** PRAC members passed a resolution calling for CSR to give all new R01 investigators who wish to reapply the opportunity to do so in the next review round.

**New Study Sections in the Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Neuroscience IRG.** Based on a suggestion from a working group of stakeholders from the pertinent scientific areas, PRAC members

endorsed the creation of two new study sections: Cellular and Molecular Biology of Neurodegeneration, and Cellular and Molecular Biology of Glia.

*Other topics discussed include new electronic review modes, electronic referral of applications to review groups, and the Open House Workshops.*

## **Ready, Set, Click: R01 Applications Go Electronic**



February 5 marks a key milestone for applicants and NIH. All R01 grant applications submitted for that and later dates must be submitted electronically. The fundamental characteristics of this important grant mechanism have not changed. But applicants and reviewers should know that some logistical details are different.

***The Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA).*** NIH is required to list *all* its funding opportunities in FOAs via links posted in Grants.gov's *Find*. NIH also posts the opportunities in the *NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts* via a specialized link. Doing so tags the application with an NIH FOA number that allows us to retrieve the application. NIH has issued a Parent Announcement for R01s (PA-07-070; <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-07-070.html>) that lists all the NIH institutes that support R01s submitted on the standard dates. (The Fogarty International Center and the National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities do not have standard dates.)

Some investigators have voiced concerns that the need to cite a PA number for an R01 submission is an erosion of NIH support for investigator-initiated research. Responding to a Parent FOA ensures that the correct application package is used and acts as the “zip code” for routing the application to NIH. It has no programmatic significance. See the following site for more details about Parent Announcements: [http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/parent\\_announcements.htm](http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/parent_announcements.htm).

***The Cover Letter*** now performs two functions: (1) Conveying any information to NIH an investigator or institution wishes to, such as requests for assignments to an Institute/Center and/or CSR review group; indications of individuals in conflict with the review of the application; and reasons for a late submission (see <http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-07-026.html>). (2) Describing the need to submit a changed/corrected application following the NIH online validation process. When errors are identified or an applicant chooses to address warning messages, a changed/corrected application must include a cover letter. It must include all the information that was in any previous cover letter as that version is not retained. It is fine to simply append the additional information as additional paragraph(s) to the original cover letter. Cover letters are only accessible to referral and review staff; it is not shared with reviewers.

***The Opportunity to Check Your Application:*** “Oops . . . I just saw a big problem in the application I sent. Can you help?” While it is best to proof your application before you send it, electronic submission provides a window that allows you one more opportunity to be sure that the correct version of the application is delivered to NIH. After the application is error free and all components have been assembled into an application image, there is a two-weekday (including holidays) delay before the application is forwarded to CSR's Division of Receipt and Referral. During that time, you should check your application and be sure that all components are correct. If a problem is found, you must work with your institutional official to reject the application and submit a changed/corrected version. Once the two weekday window is past, you must contact the Scientific Review Administrator about corrections.

***There Are Three Routes to Submitting*** an electronic application. Investigators and administrators at their institutions should be aware of them and consider which one(s) best suit their needs. See the following Web page for more info: <http://era.nih.gov/ElectronicReceipt/preparing.htm#2>

- **Forms-based Submission to Grants.gov.** This uses the PureEdge forms available at no charge through Grants.gov.
- **System to System Transfer of Data.** This requires that an organization develop an XML datastream exchange with Grants.gov
- **Service Providers.** A number of companies have developed packages of services for submissions. Available options and costs vary.

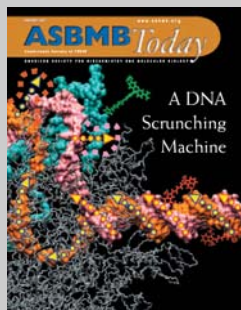
***The Bottom Line -- You Can Survive This!*** In just over a year, NIH has successfully handled over 20,000 electronic grant applications. In the fall of 2006, roughly one-third of the applications for NIH were received electronically. Each round has shown remarkable improvement in the process for both applicants and NIH. It has taken a lot of hard work by everyone and there is more to do, but at long last electronic submission is a reality for NIH. For more info, visit the electronic submission Web site: <http://era.nih.gov/ElectronicReceipt>.

## **CSR Director Invites Applicants with Questions to Contact Him**

Applicants for NIH grants may become frustrated with the grant process and its limitations. Sharing such concerns, Dr. Toni Scarpa, CSR's Director, instituted an open-door e-mail policy so applicants may contact him directly with general questions and concerns: [scarpat@csr.nih.gov](mailto:scarpat@csr.nih.gov). Dr. Scarpa answers as many of questions about the receipt, referral, and review process of NIH applications as he can. However, any appeal about a specific peer review outcome should be sent directly to the Program Officer at the appropriate NIH Institute/Center (IC) responsible for that application.

A new trans-CSR committee also was formed to consider specific concerns that require investigation and analysis. This committee develops case-by-case recommendations for his consideration, but since the same committee reviews all of the cases, this new committee will promote consistency and fairness. This committee meets weekly and works closely with CSR staff in receipt and referral and review to consider whether applications were handled appropriately. Final decisions, both positive and negative, and their justifications are sent to the applicants by the CSR Director.

***For questions about the receipt or assignment of your application, call 301-435-0715. Contact GrantsInfo for general application questions: 301-435-0714 or GrantsInfo@nih.gov.***



### ***ASBMB Today Publishes an Interview with CSR Director***

The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology asked Dr. Scarpa about the ongoing reorganization of CSR's study sections, electronic review, shorter applications, how societies can help recruit reviewers. The interview appears in the January 2007 issue of *ASBMB Today*.

View the interview online via the ASBMB Web site: <http://www.asbmb.org>.

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