

PEER REVIEW NOTES

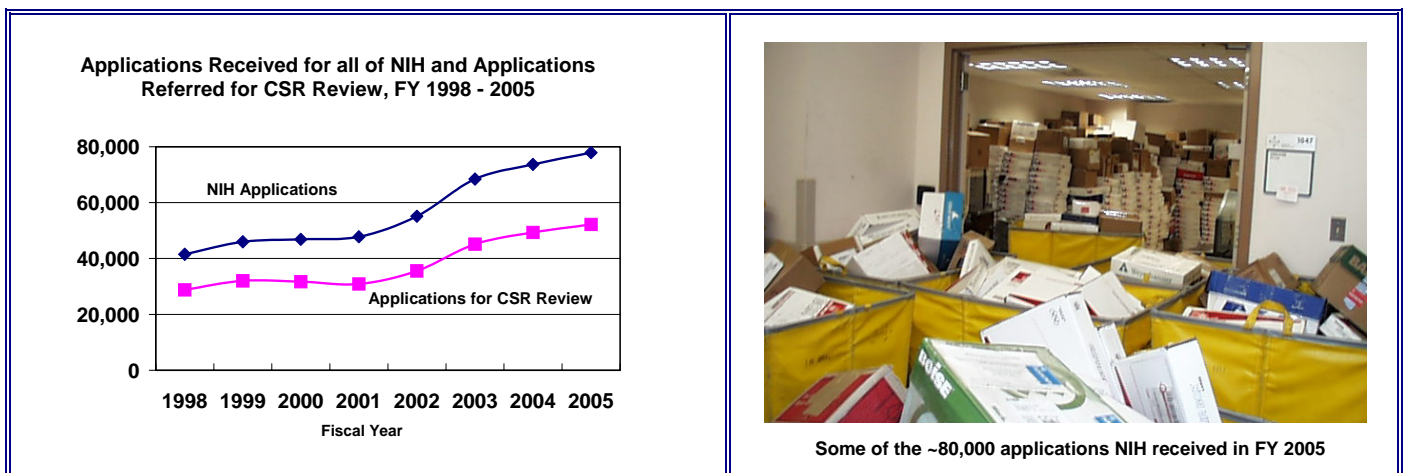
January 2006

CSR Director Discusses Reforms

Dr. Toni Scarpa discusses ongoing and future changes at the NIH Center for Scientific Review in a “Policy Forum” article that appears in the January 6, 2006, issue of *Science* magazine. You may access the full text of the article via the News and Reports Section of our Web site: <http://www.csr.nih.gov>.

Dr. Scarpa calls for both continuity and change to ensure and enhance the vitality of CSR peer review as we face new challenges. Among the most difficult ones is the dramatic rise in applications submitted to NIH in recent years. Compounding this burden on our scientific review administrators is the fact that they now must recruit many more reviewers to review the same amount of applications. Since 1995, the average number of applications assigned to a reviewer has decreased from 12 to 6 applications per meeting.

A number of developments may explain why our reviewers are taking on fewer applications. The breadth of the science reviewed and our recently reorganized study sections have increased the number of experts needed to review the same number of applications. In addition, many reviewers have less free time and may be reluctant to take on additional grant applications. Because of the length of the applications (an R01 application has 25 pages plus appendices) it can take more than a week of full-time effort to review six applications. CSR is concerned about this situation and will look for solutions so we can offer applicants the best reviews possible.



Electronic Grant Application Update: Major Milestone Passed



Over the next year and a half, NIH will require all applications for its different grant mechanisms to be submitted electronically. “It may pose some challenges,” says Dr. Scarpa, “but ultimately it will benefit reviewers and applicants alike, helping us to speed the process.”

NIH is taking a step-wise approach to implementing this congressional mandate. The biggest test to date occurred this past December, when all small business (SBIR/STTR) and conference applications had to be submitted electronically—no paper applications were accepted. The applications were submitted via the government-wide Grants.gov system (<http://www.grants.gov>) using the new SF 424 Research and Related set of forms. There were many anxious moments for both applicants and NIH staff, but the system worked as designed, and about 2,000

applications were received as expected and assigned for review in February/March 2006. The outreach program was a success: fewer than 70 paper applications were received, and over a third of these applicants were able to quickly convert to an electronic submission. While many individuals across NIH have played important roles in these successes, CSR wishes to mention the tremendous contributions of Ms. Megan Columbus, NIH Project Manager for Electronic Receipt of Grant Applications.

Impact on Reviewers



Reviewers of SBIR and STTR applications have been sent CDs with the applications and other relevant information as usual. The image quality of the electronically submitted applications is far superior to the scanned images, both for text and particularly for figures/graphs. Appendix material for Phase II small business applications is also included on the CD. No paper copies of complete applications will be sent to reviewers. If reviewers wish printed pages, they must print out the needed pages—we expect that reviewers will mainly print the Research Plan. A modest increase (\$10) will be made in the flat rate reimbursement to cover printing costs for reviewers who have SBIR applications to review. Conference grant application reviews are organized by

the various NIH Institutes and Centers, and we expect a variety of approaches may be used. Reviewers will, however, receive paper copies of corrections/updates when necessary, since the system for submitting this information electronically is still being developed.

The timetable and other information on this historic change are available on the Electronic Submission Web site: <http://era.nih.gov/ElectronicReceipt>. Several grant mechanisms are slated for required electronic submission over the next few months. At the summer meetings, reviewers will encounter applications for the following awards in the new electronic format: Academic Research Enhancement Awards (R15s), Shared Instrumentation applications (S10s) and Research Dissertation Grants (R36s). Once a change has been made for a grant mechanism, all subsequent applications must be submitted electronically, including those for the AIDS submission dates, Requests for Applications (RFAs) and Program Announcements (PAs, PASs, and PARs). NIH staff will be applying the lessons learned from the initial efforts to improve our computer systems and methods of handling these applications as we anticipate future transitions of R03 and R21 applications in June 2006 and R01s along with several other mechanisms (numerically the biggest batch of applications) in October 2006. The remaining mechanisms will make the switch in 2007.

You Should Prepare for These Changes Now

You and your institution should complete the necessary registration steps so you are ready to submit electronically. Go to the Electronic Submission Web site for directions and tips: <http://era.nih.gov/ElectronicReceipt>. You should also become familiar with the 424 R&R form (<http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/funding/424/index.htm>). Registration for Grants.gov and the Commons may take up to four weeks, so it is a good idea to register now, even if you do not anticipate an immediate submission. (Please note this is a separate registration process from the one needed to receive payment for review activities.)

View the Video



**NIH's New
Electronic Grant
Application
Process and the
SF424 (R+R)**

<http://era.nih.gov/ElectronicReceipt/training.htm>

Learning From Feedback

NIH has established a Comments and Feedback page on the Electronic Submission Web site, and we have already received useful information. Many of the “pioneers” who submitted in December 2005 have said that they had some difficulties in their first attempts to submit, but they see great potential in electronic submission and look forward to using it in the future. NIH will continue to work with Grants.gov to improve the process and to take advantage of the opportunities for improving our business practices.

New Reimbursement System Sends \$4 Million to Reviewer Bank Accounts

We had a rocky start rolling out the new system for reimbursing reviewers and procedures for making hotel arrangements via a new contractor.

The changes were made in response to a mandate from Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services to streamline and make the system more accountable. While CSR had been looking to improve its 50-year-old reimbursement and honorarium system, the agency faced a tremendous challenge when the mandate gave staff a short time to make the necessary adjustments.

But by mid-January, more than 80 percent of reviewers were correctly registered for payment under the new DUNS registry system and—this is the important part—they were actually paid. Some \$4 million in honorariums and flat-rate expense payments had been deposited directly into the bank accounts of NIH’s peer reviewers.



Reviewers may find interesting restaurants on Bethesda Row

“Some glitches remain,” said Edwin Echegoyen, the Project Officer of the new reimbursement program. “The system is still evolving.” He said that CSR’s Scientific Review and Evaluation Award (or SREA) employees have been working diligently with the NIH Office of Financial Management, the meeting planner vendor (Team PSA), and the travel service agency (World Travel Service) to ensure the next review cycle will be smoother. He is confident on this point, given the lessons learned and the cooperation forged in the first round.

“We expect,” Echegoyen said, “many of the problems will soon be behind us and all reviewers will benefit from speedy payments, straight to their bank accounts, at flat rates that reduce the need for keeping receipts, for booking their own rooms, and for other paper work that was previously required.”

Reviewers may access more information regarding the new reimbursement program at <http://www.srea.nih.gov>.

New Data on NIH Peer Reviews of Clinical Research Applications

Dr. Theodore Kotchen, CSR’s Special Advisor on Clinical Research, and his NIH colleagues have published the results of new studies to assess the possible reasons why clinical research applications are slightly less successful than nonclinical applications. This research suggests that the observed difference is not related to (1) the percent of clinical applications assigned for review to a study section, (2) the greater cost of clinical research, or (3) the clinical research experience of the reviewers.

Dr. Kotchen and senior CSR staff recognize the importance of addressing the problem while continuing to assess it and to identify strategies to improve the applications submitted by clinical investigators. The

article discusses CSR's ongoing and planned activities to help NIH better identify promising clinical research applications so that this important research may advance.

The article appears in the January 2006 issue of the *Journal of Investigative Medicine*: "Outcomes of NIH Peer Review of Clinical Grant Applications." (<http://www.afmr.org/journal.cgi>) The journal also includes a thoughtful commentary. A detailed summary is provided in a Backgrounder posted on the News and Reports section of CSR's homepage: <http://www.csr.nih.gov>.

Skiing Chairman Hits the Ice But Still Makes Peer Review



Andrew Robertson is Chief Scientific Officer of the Keystone Symposia in Colorado

Dr. Andrew Robertson fell while skiing in Colorado on Thanksgiving Day, suffering both a spiral fracture of his tibia and a second tibial fracture near his knee. But that didn't stop him from traveling to Bethesda, Md., to chair a study section review a week and a half later.

His story and his thoughts on his nearly 10 years as a reviewer are featured in a new CSR Reviewer Story now on our Web site: <http://cms.csr.nih.gov/AboutCSR/CSRReviewerStories>.

CSR Reviewer Stories are designed to highlight some of the more than 15,000 dedicated people who help NIH identify the most promising research for the future. We also share their stories to help make the peer review process more transparent. Applicants may learn how to produce better grant applications, and reviewers—particularly new ones—may learn how to produce more useful critiques.

CSR Has Created a New LISTSERV for Reviewers

This LISTSERV e-mails notices when new issues of the *Peer Review Notes* newsletter is available online, along with press releases and other CSR news and information useful to those who review NIH grant applications and others interested in our efforts to ensure the quality and timeliness of NIH peer reviews as the research landscape continues to change.

To subscribe, send an e-mail to listserv@list.nih.gov with the following text in the message body: subscribe CSR-PEERREVIEWNOTES [your full name] Do not include the brackets. The subject line should be blank.

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