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New Video for NIH Basic Research Applicants and Reviewers

The NIH Director Dr. Francis Collins and senior staff from CSR, the Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, and the National Cancer Institute joined forces to produce a webinar. Their goal was to emphasize NIH’s commitment to basic research and to help those who submit and review basic research grant applications to do their best.

View this video via CSR’s Webinar Web page.

Congressional Support for NIH

This past December, Republicans and Democrats came together in a welcomed bipartisan effort to pass the 21st Century Cures Act. This act includes many provisions that will have significant impact on health programs and research coordinated by the states, FDA and NIH.

“Congress has provided an enormous gift to science . . . that reflects a deep confidence in the promise of biomedical research,” said NIH Director Francis Collins, in an article he wrote for the New England Journal of Medicine with Dr. Kathy Hudson. Though Congress failed to establish the funding level for fiscal year 2017, Dr. Collins is hopeful. “We remain optimistic that strong
support for the NIH budget will be reflected in the ultimate decisions about fiscal year 2017 budget and beyond.”

**Key NIH-Related Elements of the Cures Act**

- Commits an additional $4.8 billion over 10 years to:
  - The Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies Initiative
  - The Precision Medicine Initiative
  - The Beau Biden Cancer Moonshot
  - Regenerative Medicine Efforts

- Provides new assistance for early stage researchers through:
  - A new NIH Office to promote and coordinate opportunities for these researchers and advance efforts to advance emerging researchers, particularly women and underrepresented individuals
  - Additional student loan repayment efforts

- Allows NIH to require that data from NIH research be shared so biomedical research can advance more rapidly.

Learn More by reading the NEJM article: **The 21st Century Cures Act – A View from the NIH.**

**Top 5 Things SROs Wish Reviewers Would Do**

1. **Post Your Critiques and Scores Before the Due Date.** Your fellow reviewers will have the time needed to see points of agreement and key points they missed. Your Chair will be able to identify and evaluate reviews with highly divergent scores. And your SRO can plan the review order. It could help if you submitted your critiques/scores as you write them. Remember you can polish your critiques after your meeting.
2. **Make Sure Your Scores Match Your Critiques and Meeting Comments.**
   Keeping your critiques and scores in sync strengthens your critiques and provides applicants clear assessments.

3. **Revise Your Critiques and Criterion Scores Soon After the Meeting:** If your assessment evolved during the discussion, your revisions are critical so NIH and applicants have a clear understanding of your final judgements. Your SRO needs to receive your revisions quickly, because he/she is working overtime to complete summary statements by their 15 and 30 day deadlines.

4. **Prepare and Focus Your Comments at the Meeting:** Don’t read your critiques or the specific aims. Highlight score-driving strengths and weaknesses with a focus on the big picture. Note where you agree with other reviewers without repeating what they said.

5. **Check Your Review Assignments Early to Identify Potential Conflicts.**
   Last minute surprises mean extra stresses for your SRO who must beg a reviewer to take on a late new assignment or reschedule the review.

**CSR SROs gave us a lot of different wishes That are very similar guidance can be found in the** Insider’s Guide to NIH Peer Review for Reviewers.

**Bonus Wishes**

- **Read the critiques of the top-scoring applications you were not assigned ahead of time.** It will help you calibrate your scores and can help vitalize the discussion.

- **Have fun!** Tap into the passion that got you into your area of research. Whether you give an application a low or high score, we often can tell you’ve enjoyed reading an application. Your comments are thoughtful and comprehensive.

**Top Things Reviewers Wish CSR Would Do**

We think it’s only fair that we ask you to tell us what you wish CSR would do to make it easier or better to be a reviewer. Feel free to let us know what you think in the comments section below! [CSR Blog Comment Policy](#)
8 Ways to Successfully Navigate NIH Peer Review Videos

CSR just posted the videos from two recent briefings for R01 and Fellowship applicants. These videos cover the 8 Ways to Successfully Navigate NIH Peer Review and get a grant. The videos also include a session during which NIH and CSR experts answered questions from R01 and Fellowship applicants.

View these videos via CSR’s Webinar Web page.

Simplification of the Vertebrate Animals Section

Since last January, the requirements of the Vertebrate Animals Section (VAS) of grant applications and cooperative agreements have been simplified. As people continue to adjust, we thought we would summarize the changes.

The changes were made to remove redundancy with the review of animal study protocols by Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees (IACUC) while still meeting the requirements of the Public Health Service Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. The changes simplify the VAS criteria and reduce burden on applicants and reviewers.

How Has the VAS Changed?

The VAS has been simplified by the following changes:

- A description of veterinary care is no longer required
- Justification for the number of animals has been moved from the VAS
- The method of euthanasia has been moved from the VAS

One thing that hasn’t changed is that applicants should not overstuff their application by inserting material in the VAS that should be placed in the research plan or other parts of the applications.

Does the NIH No Longer Care about These Issues?

NIH cares about these issues, however, in the interest of minimizing redundancy and reducing burden, they are now addressed in other parts of the application.
Veterinary care is covered in the description of the program of animal care and use in the Animal Welfare Assurance (Assurance) of the awardee institution.

The justification for the number of animals is an element of the experimental design and should be described in the Research Strategy section. Applicants must state only the total number of animals proposed in the VAS.

The method of euthanasia is addressed in the FORMS-D Cover Page Supplement or PHS Fellowship Supplemental forms. A description and justification of the method of euthanasia are required in the forms only if the method is not consistent with the AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals.

Justification of sex as a biological variable is factored into the research design and should be described in the Research Strategy section. Applicants must state only the sex of the animals in the VAS.

**What Are the Current Review Criteria for the VAS?**

Reviewers now evaluate the VAS according to the following criteria:

- Description of procedures involving animals including species, strains, ages, sex and total number to be used;
- Justifications for the use of animals versus alternative models and for the appropriateness of the species proposed; and
- Interventions to minimize discomfort, distress, pain and injury.
- Justification for euthanasia method if NOT consistent with the AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals.

**More Information**

To learn more about the updated VAS requirements, see the Vertebrate Animals Section, the updated VAS worksheet, and the FAQs.

**SRO Helps Advance Peer Review in Indonesia**

Dr. David Winter thought it was a long shot. But it was one worth going for. The State Department was seeking someone with a biomedical research background and experience in both program management and scientific review to help the new Indonesian Science Fund finish setting up a new grants program. It needed to build a peer review system from scratch. Winter is the Scientific Review Officer for CSR’s Cellular and Molecular Immunology A study section, and he earlier served four years as a Program Officer at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.
Winter’s chief told him he would need to make a compelling case. It turns out it wasn’t that hard. “Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world,” said Winter. “Helping them establish a rigorous peer review system could have a big impact, and it could pave the way for future collaborations. And this would be an exciting way to get new leadership experience.”

CSR has helped many countries in this way with the belief that everyone benefits when better research is funded, so CSR Director Dr. Richard Nakamura enthusiastically approved Winter’s request. But there was one catch. “There was no one to run my study section,” said Winter. “So I would have to continue to do most of my regular duties here as well as my duties over there.” The challenge didn’t stop Winter from packing his bags. It helped that his chief and coworkers volunteered to help with study section tasks he couldn’t do overseas.

The Indonesian Science Fund was just as excited that Winter was coming. “They were receiving the grant applications while I was getting there,” he said. When he did, he was impressed to find The Indonesian Fund had a young and vibrant staff and the support of both the Indonesian government and the governments of U.S., Australia, Great Britain and the Netherlands. The Fund’s future seems even brighter when he discovered that the country has many world-class researchers, including some with degrees from UC Berkeley, Harvard, MIT, Oxford and the Pasteur Institute.

Winter quickly got to work with the Fund’s chief officer. They discussed core concepts of peer review -- such as maintaining confidentiality and avoiding conflicts of interest -- and discussed how the Fund could best address these issues. “I left it to them to make their own decisions. But I always emphasized that everything relies on the integrity of the process, because if you lose the trust of the government or the scientific community, your system is going to fail.”

When the chief officer left the Fund the next month, Winter faced a big leadership challenge serving as a go-between for the donor countries, senior Indonesian officials and the Fund’s staff. “I needed to lead without leading. It became very much a coaching position where I cheered them on. There were stressful times, but I tried to get everyone focused on the great promise Indonesia and the Fund has. For instance, the country has some of the greatest biodiversity on the planet. Which is why we saw a lot of applications for high-throughput screening of natural products. It would not take discovering many useful molecules to dramatically improve their economy.”

Meanwhile, Winter was doing his fulltime job of writing and editing summary statements in the evenings and weekends. “But I had a fantastic time,” he said. “I learned a lot and hope I had a good impact.”

The first round of reviews went well and the Indonesian Science Fund will name the award winners soon. Winter believes there is a lot of good news to come. “Indonesia has the scientific community and natural resources to take a leading role
in global biomedical research,” said Winter. “The Indonesian Science Fund is its best opportunity to build on these potentials.”