Tips for Advocates from NCI Peer Review Staff

This document summarizes the key points made at the pilot CARRA member peer review training held May 10 – 12, 2004. It contains three sections:

1. Role of the CARRA member/patient advocate on the peer review panel
2. How to begin reviewing the grant applications once you receive them
3. Scoring the grant applications

All of the points made in this document refer to the NIH/NCI peer review process, unless otherwise noted. This document contains links to external Web sites. Please see the Linking Policies section for more information

1. Role of the CARRA member/patient advocate on the peer review panel

- Do not to refer to your personal experience with cancer. Express your opinion as objectively as possible in order to represent your general cancer community. Scientists on the peer review panel represent their scientific viewpoint rather than their personal viewpoint.
- Questions from patient advocates often bring clarity to peer review. Questions that patient advocates could ask during a review include:
  - Can someone summarize for me in plain language why this is important?
  - How will this advance the field?
- Patient advocates can look at all or any part of the grant application that they are interested in. Most often patient advocates are asked to focus on the human subjects protection issues.
- The patient advocate is an equal on the peer review panel.
- All reviewers, including the patient advocates, use the same review criteria for the applications under review (i.e., patient advocates do not use special review criteria).
- The peer review process is not intended to be a debate between panel members, but instead is a critical review of the application. Patient advocates are in a partner role with the scientists on the peer review panel.
- The peer review panel cannot rewrite the grant application; they can only review and react to the application as it is presented.

For more information about the NCI peer review process, please visit the CARRA website at http://la.cancer.gov/carra/peer_review.html.

2. How to begin reviewing the grant applications once you receive them

- There are many different kinds of NCI peer review based on the many different funding mechanisms (RO1, PO1, K23, etc.) that are in place. Because of the many human subject aspects, Cancer Center (P20, P30), clinical Cooperative Group (U01, U10), and SPORE (P50) reviews are among the most demanding and rewarding types of peer review. PO1 reviews are also interesting, but are very different from these other types of mechanisms. Please visit the DEA website at http://deainfo.nci.nih.gov/flash/awards.htm for a complete list of grant mechanisms.

- Unlike the grant applications for the Department of Defense (DOD) Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP), NIH grant applications do not have a non-scientific summary included in the grant application. However, the Description of the project provides a short overview of the general goals of the project.

- Here are three hints for reviewing grant applications that involve studies of humans as research participants:
  - Look at these things about/within the grant application:
    1. Is this something that will help the relevant patient community? Is the study or proposed treatment something that you as a cancer patient would participate in? In order to determine the answer to these questions, the patient advocate can look at the Description (or abstract), which gives a summary of the research proposed in the application.
    2. Review the human subjects section.
       (See http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/peer/hs_review_inst.pdf for more information.)
    3. Review the inclusion of minorities, gender & children section.
       (See http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/peer/hum_anim_notice.pdf and http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/not98-024.html for more information.)

- When reviewing a clinical trial, the protocol for the clinical trial is often found in the appendix. Skim the entire grant application and focus on the clinical trial protocol from a patient perspective. Does the Human Subjects section in the application match what's in the protocol? If the informed consent form is included, is it understandable and complete?

- Some grant mechanisms encourage researchers to turn basic research findings into clinical applications. In these types of studies, the clinical trial protocol or the informed consent document patients would sign to enter the study will probably not be included in the grant application because the clinical trial cannot be designed until the later years of the project, after the basic research is completed.

- Call the Scientific Review Administrator (SRA) as many times as needed to prior to the peer review panel. The SRA is the main source of information for any questions or concerns.

For more information on reviewing grant applications, please visit the CARRA website at http://la.cancer.gov/carra/peer_review.html#Reviewing.

3. Scoring the grant applications

- The NIH/NCI peer review process is different from other types of peer review, such as the Department of Defense (DOD) Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP) peer review process or the American Cancer Society (ACS) peer review process. The NIH/NCI peer review process is different in many aspects, including: scoring, composition of the review panel, and timing of the peer review process.

- All reviewers should receive all applications *(except applications with which they may have a conflict of interest)* for their review panel, even if they are assigned a direct role (primary reviewer, secondary reviewer, reader) in the review of a subset of those grants. Most likely, you will get a paper copy of applications where you are an assigned reviewer, and the other applications will be on the accompanying CD.

- All reviewers will be asked to score all grant applications for their peer review panel, *except any applications with which they might have a conflict of interest*.

- If any reviewer on the peer review panel feels that they're not qualified to score a grant application, they may abstain from scoring that grant application.

- The Scientific Review Administrator (SRA) is the Division of Extramural Activities (DEA) staff member who is the Designated Federal Official ultimately responsible for administering the peer review panel. One of the SRA's main duties is to collect comments received from the members of the peer review panel and integrate them into a Summary Statement for the researcher who submitted the grant application. This approach protects the confidentiality of all of the reviewers and also the integrity of the peer review process.

- All researchers receive the score for their application and a Summary Statement that includes the reviewers' critiques and a Resume of the discussion of the application. The Resume and Summary of Discussion are like an "executive summary" of the main strengths and weaknesses of the application as discussed during the peer review.

For more information about Scoring and the Summary Statement, please visit the CARRA website at http://la.cancer.gov/carra/peer_review.html#Importance.

For more information on the DOD cancer research program and how you can become involved, please visit http://cdmrp.army.mil/CWG/default.htm.

For more information on the ACS cancer research program and how you can become involved, please visit
http://www.cancer.org/docroot/RES/content/RES_4_1_Background_Information_Regarding_Stakeholder_Participation_on_Grant.asp?sitearea=RES.

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