Grant Review Questions and Answers

The following interview took place after a member of the ***C*onsumer *A*dvocates in *R*esearch and *R*elated *A*ctivities (*CARRA*)** program participated in a grant review (also known as the peer review process) through the National Cancer Institute (NCI). The interview gives a summary of what it is like for a consumer advocate to participate in the peer review process.

The CARRA program provides an easy and convenient way for NCI staff to contact advocates they wish to involve in their day-to-day work activities. CARRA program staff provide a list of advocates who match the necessary criteria for specific activities and then NCI staff contact the advocates directly to involve them in an activity. CARRA program staff also work to improve, promote, and evaluate the CARRA program on an on-going basis.

For more information about the **CARRA program**, please visit http://la.cancer.gov/carra .

For more information about the **NCI Office of Liaison Activities**, the group who administers the CARRA program, please visit http://la.cancer.gov .

Q1. What activity did you participate in?

A1. I was a reviewer for a PO1 grant. A PO1 grant is a multidisciplinary grant that contains several different research projects, usually at the same institution, all related to a common theme. This particular grant was asking for several million dollars over several years and the proposal itself was at least 3 inches thick, with a 2-inch thick addendum!

Q2. How were you first contacted and asked to participate?

A2. An NCI staff member, the person who is called the Scientific Review Administrator (SRA), called me on the phone to see if I would be interested and if I was available. He briefly outlined the grant proposal, told me the dates, and told me a little bit about what my role would be. He then sent me an overview by email and once I said Yes, he then sent the whole packet by mail.

Q3. How long did it take you to review the materials?

A3. I spent about 8 hours before the review meeting going through the grant and the other materials and preparing my comments. I'm not sure if that is more or less than normal, but I even skipped lots of words that were too technical for me to understand. I tried to make sure I got the general gist of each project rather than worrying about specific scientific details.

Q4. Were you instructed to look at certain parts of the grant in more detail?

A4. Yes, the area which I needed to pay most attention to and comment specifically on was the Human Subjects Concerns in the clinical trial portions of the grant. When I got to the meeting I discovered most of the scientists there said there was a lot of technical stuff outside their own area of expertise which they didn't understand. So it was OK that I didn't understand all of the technical and science portions of the grant.

Q5. Did you feel prepared for the review meeting before you got there?

A5. Not completely, but that's probably due in large part to the fact that I hadn't ever done one of these before. I was pretty nervous, but I probably should have called or emailed the SRA before the meeting to ask more questions. During the meeting the SRA spoke to me several times and let me know that my comments and participation were greatly appreciated. That made me feel better, and more confident, about speaking up during the rest of the meeting. I felt intimidated being with all these really bright people from across the country, but they were very receptive to me and comments I made.

Q6. What was the schedule and travel like?

A6. Fortunately I live within driving distance of this particular meeting. However, that meant that on a Tuesday I worked a full day, then drove to the hotel where the meeting was, and we met as a review group that first night for 4 or 5 hours. The next day we traveled to the institution where the grant would be carried out (this part is called the site visit) and we were there from about 8 AM to 3 PM. Then we went back to the hotel and from 3:30 PM to 6:30 PM we met again. The next and last morning we met from 7:30 AM to 11:30 AM, so overall I would say it was really hard work! There was very little free time, and as someone who isn't used to reviewing grants it was mentally draining!

Q7. Once you got to the meeting, who else was there?

A7. There were about 15 other reviewers who were all MDs or Ph.D.s from institutions across the country. When I first got there I wasn't totally certain of my role, but as the meeting went on the SRA said that he appreciated my comments. So when some of the other reviewers asked what my role was I told them that I was the non-scientific person representing the human subjects interests. There were things about the project that I thought might not have worked, and I was happy to see that the other reviewers agreed with me.

Q8. Did you have an "assignment" during the meeting?

A8. Yes, I was supposed to do a "write-up" or "report" about the Human Subjects Concerns. Each part of the grant had a primary and secondary reviewer. As the patient advocate I was a secondary reviewer, but my comments were taken just as seriously as everyone else's during the meeting. All of the reviewers were very open, respectful, and willing to hear my perspective. My final write up was about a page and a half. Truthfully it probably didn't even need to be that long!

I also was allowed to comment on other areas of the grant that didn't relate to Human Subjects Concerns because this proposal had to do with they type of cancer I know the most about, colorectal cancer. I did have enough knowledge to discuss some parts of the grant in this area.

The other thing I had to do during the meeting was participate in "scoring" the grant at the conclusion of the meeting. The grant's total score determines whether it is funded or not. All of the reviewers' scores are averaged to get the total score. It turns out that the scores I assigned were either the average score or only one-tenth of a point away from the average score. When we were finished scoring I felt good about my experience because if the Federal Government is giving several million dollars to researchers you want to know that the project will yield new or helpful information. I was happy to be a part of making sure the government spends its money wisely. I was impressed that people worked very hard to make sure the project was reasonable and that government dollars were not wasted.

Q9. Did you get paid for doing all of this?

A9. Yes! Well, I will be getting reimbursed! All of my travel expenses and meals are paid for during the meeting and I receive the same $200 honorarium that the scientists and researchers receive.

Q10. So how do you feel about this experience overall?

A10. It wasn't easy, but overall it was very interesting and positive. Without breaking confidentiality of the meeting, I shared the whole process and my experience with the support group I facilitate. The patients were very interested in the grant review process and it brought the whole idea of research and the NCI closer to the patient level. This was another way to show patients how cancer research could affect their lives. I also thought that this activity was a perfect match with my interests and experiences. Even though the days were long and mentally draining I feel fortunate to have been selected to participate in this activity. I now have a HUGE appreciation for what it takes to put a grant together and also for what it takes to review the grant once it's submitted to the NCI.