

## FUNDING FOR RESEARCH: HOW TO NAVIGATE TOWARDS IT

Chia Yook Chin *FRCP*, Department of Primary Care Medicine, University of Malaya.

*Chia YC. Funding for research: how to navigate towards it. Malaysian Family Physician. 2006;1(1):36-38*

### INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that funding, or the lack of it, is one of the deterrents to conducting research. On the other hand, the good news is that primary care research does not necessarily require huge resources the way highly technical or interventional studies require. Resources are needed in several areas, predominantly manpower, which can be the most expensive component of many research projects. Usually equipment forms a smaller portion of the budget required for primary care based research.

Sometimes, there is a dilemma when trying to formulate a research project: Should one review the research areas that are more likely to secure funding and then formulate a research proposal? Or should one have a clear picture of one's research interest and then look for possible sources of funding? There are of course several factors when deciding this. If the research question is of utmost interest to you and important to clinical practice but it is not in the radar of funding bodies, then obviously one would need to write a proposal and then look for funding. On the other hand, if the area of research is not firmly decided upon and one is looking for a research area to work on, then it makes sense to examine available fund holders for their pre-determined areas of priority and analyse whether there is any area that appeals to you.

### SOURCES OF FUNDING

There are indeed many sources of research funding, internationally, nationally and locally. Broadly speaking the largest research funds available is without doubt provided by governments. However as research becomes more sophisticated in our country, so will the distribution of research funds. Frequently the government funding agencies have pre-identified priorities of research areas. Unless your research is within their agenda, the chances of securing funding are rather limited.

#### Government agencies

Governmental agencies can provide huge research fund (could be as much as RM5 million per project) but they come with several conditions. The project should have many subprojects; it must be intersectoral and it usually

runs for a minimum of 1-5 years. It also requires a lot of paperwork, project timelines, and financial projections as to when the money is needed and how it is going to be spent. There are also restrictions and justifications as to what the money can be spent on. Furthermore, progress reports are required twice annually. While all these must sound rather daunting, it is in reality not so very difficult. It needs patience and careful documentation. The advantage of this source of funding is that it is large and open to all and not necessarily confined to those affiliated to governmental bodies.

#### Universities and other tertiary institutions

The universities and other tertiary institution usually have their own allocations to support research by their own academic staff and postgraduate students. These budgets either come directly from the university itself (e.g. F Vote in University of Malaya) or it could have been provided to the university by other charitable bodies (e.g. China Medical Board). These funding are limited to staff or students of the university itself. These budgets tend to be much smaller (usually around RM20,000) and runs for a shorter duration (1-3 years). However, it also has many restrictions. Equipment cannot be purchased and wages for staff has to be in accordance with the government standards, which might limit the choice of research assistants.

While the funding is limited to staff members, it does not exclude non-staff members from being part of the research team. Therefore to tap into this source, it may be advantageous to collaborate with a staff member who has access to this funding.

#### Charitable foundations

There are several charitable foundations in the country which provides research funding. These foundations are worth considering especially if the research project is in line with the foundation's philosophy. As I alluded to earlier, research in primary care does not require huge sums of money and these foundations can support such research activities.

#### Professional organisations and medical societies

There are also many professional organisations that offer research grants. While these may be very limited, I foresee that they can and will play a bigger role in supporting research in future. These professional bodies conduct courses and continuing medical education programmes

Address for correspondence: Professor Chia Yook Chin, Department of Primary Care Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: chiayc@um.edu.my

which generate funds. These funds in turn could be reinvested into supporting research. To qualify or at least stand a greater chance of getting a grant, one needs to be a member of the society and perhaps even have contributed to the cause of the society.

As of late, other medical societies have recognised that local research in their particular area is lacking. Furthermore, these societies are now in a position to offer research grants and I can foresee that the quantum plus the number of grants available will rise over the next few years. Obviously to qualify successfully for these grants would require that your research area is in their field. These grants will be open to all on a competitive basis. These are early days and competition will be thin in its initial stages and securing a grant will be easier and more likely to be successful currently.

#### **Pharmaceutical companies**

By and large pharmaceutical companies tend to commission researchers to conduct clinical trials for their own purposes. However they are able to support researcher-initiated research, provide grants of variable quantum and these can be quite substantial. Obviously for them to justify supporting a project, the research area has to be within the field of the products they have interest in. Applying to the appropriate person in the company is crucial. The best place to start is at the research arm of the company or with the medical director who usually has a better understanding about and interest in research.

#### **Commissioned clinical trials**

While commissioned clinical trials are not perceived as the pinnacle of academic research pursuits, they do serve their purposes to the individual. Firstly one gets to know how clinical trials are conducted and has a better understanding of the research findings that are presented or published. One also learns about good clinical practice (GCP) which is crucial to all good research. In fact doing clinical trials is a good way to learn about the principles of research.

The other benefit is that usually these commissioned studies provide an honorarium to the investigator. Such generated funds can be ploughed back to support your own research interest. Furthermore it also enhances your chances of securing research grants from those companies for independent research.

#### **International sources**

These are of course many international research funding bodies like the National Institute of Health, (NIH) USA, the Medical Research Council (MRC) in the United Kingdom (List A). By and large these resources are open more to their own nationals. However there is nothing to prevent collaborations, but generally the principal fund applicant will need to be a national of that country. On the other hand,

the World Health Organisation, a non-government affiliated organization, has funds for research which is open to all.

#### **Steps to secure research funding**

Once the research objective has been identified:

- Define the research area or field
- Estimate the cost of conducting your research dividing into manpower, equipment, writing material, travel
- Define the timelines of your budget so that granting bodies can visualize their own financial commitments according to your timelines.
- Examine available granting bodies and determine if your research area fits in with their priorities and interest, and the quantum they normally can support
- Determine your eligibility for the grant
- Identify eligible colleagues to collaborate with if the grant is not open to you.
- Submit comprehensive proposal with clear budget requirements
- Highlight areas where the granting body can see the synergy
- Submit progress reports to funding agency
- Establish a good track record
- Publish research findings
- Acknowledge granting body

In summary, securing research funding can be difficult, trying and frequently unsuccessful. Occasionally it requires collaboration with fellow researchers who have access to research grants that are not necessarily open to us.

However with a good proposal, and the right approach i.e. being very motivated, enthusiastic, persistent and optimistic, it is not impossible to secure research funding.

Finally you need to establish a good research track record by delivering on the research. Success breeds success and once we are seen to be adept at conducting research, funding becomes easier to secure.

See next page for list of funding sources

## List of research granting bodies

### Malaysia

1. IRPA. Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. <http://www.mosti.gov.my/>
2. Institute for Medical Research. <http://www.imr.gov.my/>
3. Malaysia Toray Science Foundation. <http://www.mtsf.org/>
4. MMA Foundation. <http://www.mma.org.my/Inside.foundation.htm>
5. Dr Ranjeet Bhagwan Singh Medical Research Trust Fund. <http://www.akademisains.gov.my>
6. Malaysian Society of Hypertension. <http://www.msh.com.my>

### International

1. Grants.gov web site for searching Federal government-wide grant funding opportunities, US. <http://www.grants.gov/>
2. National Institute of Health, US. <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/oer.htm>
3. The Funding News provides the latest index of research funding, scholarships, fellowships, and internships for postdocs, graduate students, and undergraduates, as well as listings of U.S. government funding opportunities. <http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/funding>
4. National Health and Medical Research Council Australia. <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/funding/>
5. Higher Education & Research Opportunities in the UK. <http://www.hero.ac.uk/uk/home/index.cfm>
6. Research Council UK. <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/>
7. Medical Research Council, UK. <http://www.mrc.ac.uk/>
8. World Health Organisation <http://www.who.int/en/>
9. China Medical Board of New York. <http://www.iime.org/cmb.htm>
10. BUPA Foundation. [http://www.bupaoundation.com/asp/research/grants\\_available.asp](http://www.bupaoundation.com/asp/research/grants_available.asp)

### Charitable organisations and foundations

1. Wellcome Foundation. <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/funding/>
2. Rockefeller Foundation. <http://www.rockfound.org/Grantmaking/Health>
3. Association of Medical Research Charities. <http://www.amrc.org.uk/>
4. Nonprofit Sector Research Fund. The Aspen Institute. <http://www.nonprofitresearch.org/>
5. Small Research Grants for Primary Care Practice-Based Research Networks (PBRNs) <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-HS-05-011.html>
6. Primary Health Care Research Evaluation and Development (PHC RED) Strategy <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/Publishing.nsf/Content/health-pcd-programs-pcprograms-collab.html>
7. IPCRG Research Grants Policy. <http://www.theipcr.org/resagenda/index.php>