

Research finds high cost and randomness in grant funding decisions

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Which scientific health and medical research projects receive government funding in any given year relies to some extent on 'chance' according to recent research by a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) expert in health economics.

Professor Nicholas Graves of QUT's Institute for Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI) has found high cost and randomness are features of the current [funding](#) system, which is based on a peer review process.

His research will be published in the [British Medical Journal](#) today (Wednesday September 28, 2011).

"The key problem is that the current process is overloaded with information and a reliable ranking based on peer review is difficult to achieve," he said. "The quality of peer review is known to be variable at the best of times.

"The composition of peer review committees themselves is somewhat arbitrary, depending upon who has been invited to take part and who is available. This affects funding decisions because the personalities, preferences and knowledge of committee members will vary.

"In many cases in order to get funded an applicant will have to write a really good proposal and be lucky."

Professor Graves said the National Health and Medical Research

Council of Australia (NHMRC) committed \$754 million to health and medical grants in 2009 and he based his research on 2705 of the 2983 project grant proposals received that year.

"We found 'chance' played a role in funding decisions yet at the same time these decisions have a huge impact on the careers of academics," he said.

"The current funding process is also costly and time consuming to participate in.

"With the average grant application taking 22 days to write at a cost \$17,744 each, a total of 180 years of research time was used up in 2009 to prepare applications at a cost of \$50 million, most of which was borne by applicants."

Professor Graves said with success rates for grant proposals falling worldwide and funding agency budgets expected to be flat or reduced over the next five to 10 years as the government cut back on spending in order to reduce national debt, it was important to look at the cost and the effectiveness of current funding processes.

He said it may be sensible to shorten applications so they are easier to prepare and easier to review.

"At the moment an application can be over 70 pages long and include a nine page research plan," he said.

He called for more research into ways to improve the process.

"While it would cost money to conduct this research it's likely to be only a drop in the ocean compared with total research money allocated by research funding bodies in any one year," Professor Graves said.

Chair of the NHMRC Council Professor Michael Good said: "It would be interesting to think about other ways of allocating research funding, by assessing an applicant's actual research performance, including published papers, new policies or observable improvements in health, as opposed to promises of research to come."

Professor Wayne Hall, an NHMRC Australia fellow said: "The policy of excluding some experts from [peer review](#) due to a perceived conflict of interest is problematic... the result is that those who know about the quality of the research are asked to leave the room when it is discussed."

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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