

Researchers claim NIH grant process is 'totally broken'

December 6 2012, by Bob Yirka

(Medical Xpress)—John Ioannidis, a researcher at Stanford University has, along with graduate student Joshua Nicholson, published a commentary piece in the journal *Nature*, taking the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to task for maintaining a system that they say rewards conformity while ignoring innovation.

NIH is an agency within the US Department of Health and Human Services, and is the primary federal vehicle involved in offering money in the form of grants to researchers working to make [new discoveries](#) in the biosciences. The agency reportedly has a [grant](#) budget of approximately \$30 billion a year.

In their commentary piece, Ioannidis and Nicholson suggest that the process used by those in charge at NIH favors those who wish to work on incremental increases in current fields rather than rewarding those seeking funds for innovative, but more risky ventures. To back up their claims, they ran a search on research papers published in major journals over the past decade and found 700 papers that had been cited by authors in other papers at least 1,000 times. Of those papers, they say, just 40 percent of those listed as primary authors were working under an NIH grant.

To determine who to give grants to, NIH uses what are known as Study Sections. Their job is to read proposals sent to them by prospective researchers and then to decide whether to offer a grant to carry out the things discussed in the proposal. The Study Sections are in reality a

group of people – a panel made up of scientists in the [biomedical sciences](#). And that's part of a big problem at NIH, Ioannidis and Nicholson write, because people that serve on the panels tend to get more of the grant money. They note that just 0.8 percent of the 700 oft cited papers listed NIH panel members as a primary author. They contend that being highly cited is a credible measure of the degree of innovation of work.

The result the two say, is a system that systemically encourages incremental studies while discouraging those that are looking for big breakthroughs. And that they say, has led to both conformity and mediocrity. This they add goes against NIH's mandate, which is to "fund the best science." They recommend that NIH change its grant review process to encourage more innovation even if it means taking more risks.

More information: Research grants: Conform and be funded, *Nature*, 492, 34–36 (06 December 2012) [doi:10.1038/492034a](https://doi.org/10.1038/492034a)

Too many US authors of the most innovative and influential papers in the life sciences do not receive NIH funding, contend Joshua M. Nicholson and John P. A. Ioannidis.

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