

The Australian Epilepsy Research Fund Guidelines for Assessors

The Australian Epilepsy Research Fund (AERF) has the following structure:

- The Board of directors of the Epilepsy Foundation
- Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC)
- Scientific Peer Reviewers
- Committee of people living with epilepsy/ carers (PWE/Carer Committee)
- Epilepsy Foundation Staff

Every grant submitted to the Australian Epilepsy Research Fund (AERF) goes through a rigorous scientific review process. **Each application is evaluated based on;**

1. Scientific merits
2. Relevance to the AERF's research priorities
3. Feasibility
4. Likelihood to be transformative

This document is current as at the date of signing by the Board of the Epilepsy Foundation.

1. The AERF Mission

1.1 Mission. The AERF's mission is to support research into curing or reducing the impact of epilepsy on people's lives. This is to be achieved through supporting innovation and excellence in medical and psychosocial research. The AERF scheme aims to advance understanding and improve treatment of epilepsy by supporting researchers, universities, research institutes and hospitals. The AERF aims to ensure that its funds are directed towards High Quality Research and High Quality Researchers.

1.2 Organisational Objectives. The AERF promotes strong scientific research that advances the search for a cure and addresses the goal that "no one with epilepsy should go it alone."

1.2.1 The AERF funds research into the following priority areas:

1. Pre-clinical
 - a. Understanding the causes, risk factors and genetic basis of epilepsy
 - b. Prevention and/ or cure of epilepsy
2. Applied/ translational
 - a. Translating progress made in research into treatments in clinical practice
 - b. Improving research infrastructure to facilitate translation
3. Clinical
 - a. To improve health care, including access to health services and treatment

- b. Risk factors for injuries, status epilepticus, avoidable death, SUDEP and suicide
 - c. Epilepsy and important comorbidities, specifically depression/ anxiety, acquired brain injury, autism and intellectual disability.
 - d. Understanding the experience of patients undergoing genetic testing
 - e. Limit or prevent adverse consequences of seizures and their treatment across the lifespan
4. Social/ community
- a. Improving public knowledge, awareness and attitudes towards epilepsy
 - b. Improving education for patients

1.2.2 The AERF also has a specific focus on;

1. Research into rare genetic forms of epilepsy, including understanding the underlying mechanisms and identifying novel treatments
2. Promoting research that may not be currently fundable by other agencies (such as the ARC or NHMRC) due to the preliminary nature of the studies
3. Promoting the work of early career researchers

1.3 The AERF schemes provide funding to Administering Organisations or Research Teams to support research projects. Grants may be awarded to individual researchers, but the Project Application must clearly describe and justify how the individual will be able to carry out the Project Activity and meet all required timeline milestones.

1.4 Grants will be awarded on the basis of excellence through a competitive peer review process (outlined below).

1.5 The Epilepsy Foundation will conduct periodic evaluations of the performance and administration of the grants under the AERF scheme. Details of the reporting requirements can be found in the AERF Guidelines to Applicants.

2. The Funding Process

2.1 Vision setting. The vision for each grant round will be set by the SAC and Board of Directors. While the overarching mission for the AERF is to reduce the impact of epilepsy on people's lives, the priority areas of research for AERF grants may change from year to year. Board approved changes to the priority areas for AERF grants will be published on the Epilepsy Foundation website.

2.2 Request for proposals. Requests for proposals will be made annually, with the inaugural funding round announced in October 2018. Requests will be for projects that align with the AERF's vision and mission statement. Requests may also be dependent on the level of funding available in a given Funding Cycle.

2.2.1 Applicants will be required to submit a full scientific proposal by the given deadline. Applications submitted after the deadline will not be accepted.

2.3 *Review Process.* Proposals will be reviewed by both scientific reviewers and the PWE/Carer Committee.

2.3.1 Each proposal will be subjected to a thorough scientific peer review process by two scientific reviewers external to the Epilepsy Foundation. These reviewers will be asked to serve a one-time term on committees specifically formed for each grant review cycle.

2.3.2 Following peer review, the Epilepsy Foundation will facilitate a committee of people living with epilepsy as well as family members or carers of individuals with a diagnosis of epilepsy (PWE/Carer Committee). Individuals will be chosen on the basis of their ability to engage with the content – specifically, they will not be required to have specific professional or academic qualifications but they will be required to have at least a High School Certificate level of education and be able to engage on the subject matter. The committee will be asked to consider which projects they feel will have the most significant impact on the lives of those living with epilepsy.

2.3.3 The Research Lead at the Epilepsy Foundation will tally the scores provided by scientific reviewers and the PWE/Carer Committee and submit this information to the SAC.

2.3.4 Based on the final information provided by reviewers and the PWE/Carer Committee, the SAC will then make a final recommendation to the Board of Directors.

2.4 *Approval and Awards.* Following Board Approval, Applicants will be notified regarding the outcome of their submission. This may involve the offer of an Award that is not the full amount requested or for the full timeline requested.

3. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

3.1 All Applicants and Reviewers *must* identify any conflicts of interest (Col). For Applicants, this will involve declaring and detailing any Col in the submitted Proposal. Reviewers must disclose any standing or potential Col to the Epilepsy Foundation prior to review of any submitted Proposal.

3.1.1 Col may be Institutional and/or Individual Col, and include;

- Applications from within the Epilepsy Foundation or SAC
- Collaborators of the SAC/ Epilepsy Foundation

- Former mentors/ students of the SAC/ Epilepsy Foundation staff
- Trained in the same lab as the SAC/ Epilepsy Foundation staff
- Having published with someone from the SAC/ Epilepsy Foundation
- Any other relationship with SAC/ Epilepsy Foundation that the reviewer believes puts them in conflict, such as a close personal, professional or business relationship.

3.2 If a standing Col is not declared, then the Proposal will be rejected. When a Col has been declared in a submitted research Proposal, steps must be taken to ensure that this is managed transparently. Individuals identified to have an existing Col must abstain from any involvement in the decision-making process for the length of the Funding Cycle.

3.3 Reviewers should reject proposals where there is an evident Col for themselves. Assessing proposals when there is a Col is a breach of the rules and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research

4. Assessment Process and Criteria

4.1 Prior to assessing any Proposal, reviewers should determine any Col and any breach of eligibility criteria. These criteria are laid out in the AERF Guidelines to Applicants. If a Proposal is deemed ineligible, then it should not be reviewed.

4.2 Following the identification of any Col, reviewers should assess studies and present a critique which includes (i) a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, and (ii) comments on the following;

- Innovation
- Feasibility
- Scientific merit
- Likelihood of the work to transform the field
- Are there any factors that increase/ dampen enthusiasm for support of this work?
- How well did the applicant follow guidelines?

4.2.1 It is the responsibility of the reviewer to provide;

- Objective, detailed comments
- Sufficient information to allow applicants to provide a rejoinder to your comments if necessary
- Comments must match the given scores
- Observe Conflict of Interest rules (see Section 4) and declare anything of concern to the Epilepsy Foundation

4.2.2 *Applicant Track Records.* Reviewers should also carefully consider the Track Records of the CIs and AIs on the proposal to determine how well suited they are to conduct and complete the Project Activity. The AERF is committed to ensuring that knowledge from health and medical research is translated from the research sector to industry, including through commercialization and improvements to health service delivery. In order to appropriately recognize the value of industry-relevant expertise, industry skills, experience, and achievements are considered in assessing applicants' track records.

4.2.3 *Relative to Opportunity.* Reviewers should also take into consideration Applicants' achievements relative to opportunity (ROPE). It is important to take ROPE into account and recognize research excellence in the context of the diversity of career and life experiences, including (i) career experiences, and (ii) career disruptions /interruptions. Circumstances that are "relative to opportunity" may include consideration of available resources, clinical, administrative or teaching workload, relocation of an applicant and/ or his/ her laboratory or clinical practice setting, and for ATSI applicants this should include consideration of community obligations, including 'sorry business.'

4.2.4 *Similar Applications.* Chief Investigators (CI) may concurrently hold a maximum of **five** AERF grants at any one time. Where it appears that an applicant has submitted Project Proposals that are similar in research aims or activities, then the Applicant may be asked to provide a written report clearly identifying the difference between the research aims/ activities of the two Projects. If reviewers feel that the two projects are not sufficiently different, then the Applicant may be required to decline or relinquish one of the grants.

4.2.5 *Evaluation Criteria.* All reviewers should score the proposal according to the NHMRC model of evaluation (NB: Category Descriptors can be found on the AERF Reviewer Form):

1. **Poor** – Uncompetitive and has significant weaknesses or more fatal flaws. Not recommended for funding.
2. **Unsatisfactory** – Uncompetitive and has significant weaknesses. Not recommended for funding.
3. **Marginal** – Sound, but lacks a compelling element. Unsupportive of recommendation for funding.
4. **Good** – Sound, but lacks a compelling element. Support recommendation of funding with reservation.
5. **Very good** – Interesting, sound and compelling. Support recommendation of funding with reservation.
6. **Excellent** – Of high quality and strongly competitive. Strongly support recommendation of funding.
7. **Outstanding** – Of the highest quality and at the forefront of research activity. Recommended unconditionally.

4.2.6 *Further Evaluation Criteria.* Other factors to consider when critiquing applications include;

- Value for money – Proposals need to include a thorough budget justification.
- Research environment – This is specific to the Proposal under assessment (over and above the institution). Reference to a good ERA score is not sufficient justification.
- Impact – This is not necessarily about the number of patients who may be affected, rare conditions are given equal consideration to more common epilepsy syndromes or conditions. The focus should be on the potential to improve the lives of those living with epilepsy.
- Weigh each project according to the *potential* to make a difference – this is irrespective of whether this difference can be translated sooner versus in the more distant future.
- The reviewers do not *have* to recommend grants in a given cycle – the goal is to fund the best science, therefore they may recommend all, some or none of the proposals. Final decisions are made the by the Board of Directors.
- While there is a focus on projects that may not get funded by other bodies (e.g., NHMRC), projects that are eligible for NHMRC may still be eligible for AERF grants.
- Reviewers can only see scores from other reviewers once they are locked in.

4.2.7 When documenting comments, reviewers should NOT;

- Identify themselves or other researchers or proposals in the feedback.
- Include ratings in the justification text.
- Include information about the potential ineligibility of the project – this information should be provided to the Epilepsy Foundation. Eligibility considerations should be kept separate from the assessment process.

4.2.8 If reviewing more than one Proposal and the same score is given to more than one, please indicate relative strength through the use of an alphabetical ranking system (a, b, c...). For example, if two/ three studies are given an overall ranking of 5 (Very Good), indicate the relative order as 5a, 5b, and 5c. If the Proposals are of equivalent strength, then do not include further information.

4.3 Following the peer review process, a PWE/Carer Committee will comment on the impact that the findings from the Proposals are likely to have from their perspective. This information will help to inform the final decision and allocation of grant awards.

4.4 Following these two processes, the SAC should comment on to what extent, if successfully completed, this research will transform epilepsy research before submitting the final recommendations to the Board.

4 REJOINDER

5.1 Applicants may be given the opportunity to submit a rejoinder to respond to reviewers comments. The decision to request a rejoinder will be made by the reviewers and AERF.

5.2 Rejoinders are then reviewed by the peer reviewers before they submit their final comments to the Research Lead. Rejoinders will not be reviewed in detail by the PWE/Carer Committee.

5 SELECTION MEETING

6.1 Based on detailed comments from the peer reviewers and the PWE/Carer Committee, the SAC will finalise recommendations to forward on to the Epilepsy Foundation's Board of Directors. The SAC should;

- Take note of any issues that may have skewed the assessment or ranking of a particular proposal.
- Closely scrutinise ROPE issues.
- Resolve contentious proposals or proposals around the 'fundable line' by anonymous voting.