4.1 Peer review

Nearly all funding agencies subject applications for support to some form of independent peer review. Usually, this will take the form of soliciting comments on the proposal from scientific experts. Some will be selected for their expertise in scientific areas included in a proposal, while others may be chosen for their broad experience to give a generalist perspective. Thus, the application should include a balance of appropriate details and a broader vision, as the familiarity of those conducting the review with the subject area may vary.

Most agencies do not reveal the identity of independent reviewers, so that they provide frank objective comments, including for applications from persons they know or are known by. Agencies sometimes solicit suggestions from applicants as to who might review a proposal, although they may choose not to use anyone suggested. On rare occasions, applicants request that certain individuals not be asked to review their application. This may be because of potential conflicts of interest or because the applicant considers that the individuals may not be objective. Funding agencies do try to take such requests into consideration in their choice of reviewers.

Most agencies allow applicants to see the anonymized reviews or extracts from them, in which reviewers will usually highlight strengths and weaknesses of a proposal. These comments may be sent either after a funding decision has been made or to applicants requesting a response before the funding decision is made. Policies vary from agency to agency. If applicants are given the opportunity, they should always respond carefully and concisely to criticisms or suggestions made by referees, as both the referees’ reports and the response to them will be considered by the panel that makes the final funding decision (see Section 6).

It is common that the review process is conducted in two stages. Some agencies recommend that the applicants first
submit a 'letter of intent' that gives a brief description of the proposed research. The agency will then advise whether or not it falls within their remit and will advise whether or not a full proposal should be prepared. Changes that would improve the proposal’s chances of being supported might also be suggested. One of the purposes of this two-stage approach is to allow the funding agencies to reduce the number of full proposals reviewed, so they can focus on the most promising ones. If an opportunity is given for submission of a letter of intent, applicants should make use of this before preparing a full proposal.

4.2 Funding committees

Decisions whether or not to fund applications are usually made or recommended by an advisory committee. In some funding schemes, applicants may be asked to attend for an interview, as part of the proposal review process. Members of these committees will have expertise in the general area of all the proposals they have to deliberate on. The identities of members of funding committees are usually made available, and it is a good strategy, especially if an interview is involved, for an applicant to read some of their recent work to try to guess some of the issues on which they are likely to focus in their questioning. The detailed discussions that funding committees have, in order to come to a decision on a specific application, are usually strictly confidential. The funding agency will usually convey an appropriate summary of the discussions, if relevant, to applicants. This is particularly useful if an application has been rejected, as a summary of the reasons for rejection may help the development of an improved proposal for the same or another funding agency. Most funding agencies regard it as highly inappropriate for applicants to have direct contact with members of funding committees regarding the application, and members are instructed specifically not to discuss applications outside committee meetings. Whenever a proposal is being reviewed where a member of the committee has a potential conflict of interest, they are usually asked to leave the room. Examples include where the individual or someone from their institution is involved in the proposal.

Funding agencies endeavour to support the best proposals where the research question, the timeliness of the study, the ability of the scientists involved, and the potential impact of the results all come together to make a compelling case for support of the proposal. In a proposal for an intervention trial, applicants should think carefully about how their study will stand out among potentially competing proposals. Whatever the area, the applicant needs to convey that the proposed study is important and timely and has achievable goals.

Most field trials are conducted in partnerships between research institutions and public health systems. For this reason, it is very important to have a clear definition of roles, responsibilities, and complementary expertise of the parties involved. How any ethical or legal issues related to potential consequences of the study will be handled should be carefully explained.

4.3 Competitive process

Obtaining grants is a highly competitive process. All agencies receive far more applications than they are able to fund, so a rejection does not necessarily mean that the proposal was weak. The decision on whether to resubmit a revised proposal to the same or another agency should take the feedback into account. Sometimes, but not always, the funding agency’s officer administering the application may be willing to give advice on this.