Change in NIH Funding Policy

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In a recent announcement (http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/05/nih-impose-grant-cap-free-funds-more-investigators) The National Institutes of Health (NIH) stated that it is moving forward with a policy that will limit the extent of grant support to a single lab by instigating a plan that hopefully will result in more equitable distribution of limited funds. This decision represents the conclusions arrived after years of debate at NIH as to how to distribute their limited funds in a way that could benefit more researchers.

The new policy relies on a new metric called the Grant Support Index, which is a measure of grant support based on type, complexity and size. Using the Grant Support Index, a sample calculation would limit each lab to have no more than the equivalent of three R01 grants (NIH’s grant mechanism for discrete health-related projects). This plan will hopefully free up some money for struggling midcareer scientists. The agency estimates that as many as 1600 more labs could be benefit from such as redistribution.

Predictably, there are objections to the plan, such as from Ross McKinney, chief scientific officer for the Association of American Medical Colleges, who feels that “The people who get lots of grants are by and large brilliant people doing really good work.” I take exception to this statement because of the implication that investigators who fail to get continuous grant support are not brilliant and not doing good work. Over the years of having both served on study sections (groups formed by NIH for peer review of applications) and received NIH support, I have come to the conclusion that obtaining
funding is a skill that may not necessarily be coincident with doing the best science. A second objection is that “large, well-funded labs also [support] junior investigators who are struggling to win funding” (McKinney). In many cases the junior investigators have problems obtaining grant support because they are not viewed as independent by study sections mainly because their publications usually contain the name of the lab principal. Furthermore, not usually acknowledged, it is frequently the innovations of the younger scientists that contribute to the success of the lab.

I will always be grateful to a mentor in whose lab I worked as a junior investigator. She not only allowed me to publish on my own, but also helped me write my first grant application without any acknowledgement of her contribution. Without such help I may have continued as a “junior investigator” for my entire career.

Not unexpectedly, an immediate outcry protesting this plan has been raised by many grant recipients, causing NIH to modify this plan resulting in a reduction of the number of labs that might benefit from 1600 to 900.

Hopefully, the new policy towards funding distribution will not be further modified and can be executed with success resulting in the retention of more midcareer scientists in academia.

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