

April 7, 2010

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Center for Scientific Review
National Institutes of Health
RKL2 - Two Rockledge Center, 3030 6701 Rockledge Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892-7776

Francis Collins, Ph.D. NIH Director National Institutes of Health 9000 Rockville Pike Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Drs. Scarpa and Collins:

On behalf of the Biophysical Society and its 8700 members, I write to express concerns about changes to the NIH peer review process. We recognize that many of the changes are still so recent that it is impossible to evaluate them definitively, but want to share the early feedback we have received from our membership to assist you as you move forward.

We commend the NIH for working to fix shortcomings of the peer review system that include the difficulty NIH has had in finding qualified reviewers due to the heavy work loads and the increasing amounts of time researchers are spending on preparing applications rather than research. The shortened applications, the structured critique templates, and the virtual reviews are logical attempts to find solutions to those problems.

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However, based on feedback from members who have participated in study sections in the last year, we are concerned that the new structured critique templates result in "superficial reviews" and do not provide enough feedback to applicants. In the case of a grant that does not score well, the templated answers do not tell the applicant whether he/she failed to present something clearly in the grant application or if there was a fundamental problem with the proposal. In addition there is not enough information provided to determine whether the reviewer is off base in his/her evaluation. Even if an application is approved for funding, an applicant does not know what the reviewer thought were its particular strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the structured critique templates do not provide meaningful feedback to NIH administrators to help them make funding decisions.

Reviewer feedback is a critical part of the NIH review process, especially for new investigators. It provides the information applicants need to decide whether they should revise and resubmit, and how to strengthen their proposals. While reviewers accustomed to the old system have reported that they continue to offer more extensive feedback, the fact that it is not required by the structured critique templates is of concern. We know that transparency was a major reason for NIH moving to the structured critique templates, and are concerned that the new format may actually have decreased transparency.

Concern has also been expressed by members who have participated in the virtual reviews with which NIH has been experimenting. These members feel that reviewers may not do as thorough a job of critiquing a grant application as they should when they do not have to face their colleagues in person. Again, we recognize NIH is experimenting with these review methods and will be evaluating the results. We hope that you will look closely at the quality of the reviews done virtually and remain open to further input on this issue.

We know that as part of the NIH's plan to enhance peer review, the institute has an "ongoing review of peer review." We hope that as part of that process you will look closely at how the structured critique templates can be improved to ensure applicants and NIH staff receive the feedback they need, and that you look at the comparative quality of the virtual reviews. We ask that the NIH share both the methods and outcomes of these evaluations with the research community in an effort to make the process as transparent as possible. We will be glad to do our part as liaison, if needed.

Thank you very much for considering our comments. Please let us know how we can be helpful to you as you continue to work to improve the peer review process.

Sincerely,

Peter Moore

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President