

## **BAD Newsletter, Summer 2008**

### **Research for patient benefit – exactly what is says on the tin**

*Hywel Williams, Professor of Dermato-Epidemiology at the Centre of Evidence-Based Dermatology at the University of Nottingham*

#### **Poacher turned gamekeeper**

Outside of my role as a clinical dermatologist and researcher, I have worn a number of interesting hats over the years including Director of Research and Development for our Trust and chair of the National Research Development Support Unit Network. Now, having spent most of my academic life striving to obtain grants for funding research, I have been lucky enough to get involved in commissioning research for the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) – initially as a commissioning member of the Health Technology Assessment Board and over the last 18 months as Chair of the Research for Patient Benefit Programme (RfPB) Board for East Midlands. I want to tell you more about RfPB as I think it provides a great opportunity for clinical dermatology research, and because many dermatologists that I have talked to seem to be unaware of the scheme.

#### **Where did research for patient benefit come from?**

During the consultation stage for the new NHS research strategy *Best Research for Best*, the single largest request was for a return of regionally-responsive research funding in England. In response to this request, Research for Patient Benefit was launched in 2006 with the clear aim of supporting research that could result in patient benefit ie “exactly as it says on the tin”. The Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) Programme is a nationally co-ordinated funding stream for regionally commissioned . The national director of the scheme is Professor Celia Davies, and there are ten regional funding committees in England, with budgets set in proportion to the regional population. Substantial funds are on offer – the budget will rise to £25 million each year for the programme, with each project costing up to a maximum of £250,000 and lasting up to three years. The scheme is run by the central commissioning facility – a well organised administration that supports a number of the NIHR funding schemes. All NHS researchers in England can apply.

Different funding arrangements for clinical research are available from the Wales Office for Research and Development for Health and Social Care, the Chief Scientist Office for Scotland and the Northern Ireland Research and Development Office.

### **What sort of things does RfPB fund?**

The RFPB programme is very much concerned with research related to day-to-day practice in areas identified and developed by health service staff and service users. Such research could study the provision and use of NHS, explore whether interventions are effective and provide value for money, or formally assess innovations and developments in healthcare which will benefit of patients. You can view a list of the projects commissioned to date on the CCF website, which contains really helpful information about the scheme including application forms, closing dates, various director's messages and frequently asked . The scheme is a responsive one, so you can submit a project on any idea in dermatology that you think could result in patient benefit in the short to medium term.

### **The process**

Three competitions are held each year. If you intend to submit an application, you will first need to submit a short registration of intent (ROI) via the CCF website to help with planning. Complete applications are then submitted and checked to see whether they are appropriate for the scheme by a formally constituted preliminary scrutiny committee, typically composed of 4 to 5 members of the full committee with different expertise. Some applications such as those exploring disease mechanisms that do not appear to have clear patient benefit in the short to medium term, or those that are written in a very unclear way with major methodological flaws may be excluded at this stage. Around 12 to 24 applications are then sent out of Region to around four or 5 peer reviews that include content, methodological and lay perspectives. These are then discussed in an all day meeting by the Regional Committee which usually consists of around 24 members with a range of methodological expertise including clinical trials, statistics and qualitative research, as well as content expertise in many disease topic areas from a range of health care professionals in secondary and primary care. Public/patient involvement is also strong with two committee members fulfilling such a role. Panel conflicts of interest are dealt with by members leaving the room. To date, Regional Committees have typically deemed around two to five

submissions as being of sufficient importance and high standard to commission. Lists of committee members are all available on the CCF website.

### **Some reflections about the scheme to date**

An ideal RfPB application addresses an important question to the NHS which local health care workers have identified. The application needs to be very clearly written so that a person who is not from your clinical area can understand why the study question is important and how you plan to answer it. Team composition is important, and joint applications by NHS clinicians working in partnership with academic institutions are especially welcome. It is a good idea to involve others with methodological expertise such as statisticians, health economists or qualitative researchers as appropriate, as well as patients or carers with the condition being studied. Applications need to be convincing in the sense of the importance of the question and the methods to address that question. Only the highest quality applications are funded, and some tips for a successful outcome are outlined in Box 1.

Please don't feel hard done by if you try and sneak a basic science project into the RfPB scheme only to be rejected on scope – other schemes such as the newly launched MRC Efficacy and Mechanisms Evaluation programme are clearly earmarked for such important research. I should also say that it is difficult to deliver a full-scale randomised controlled trial in the NHS for £250,000 over 3 years nowadays, yet I still see applications coming in for definitive trials that are hopelessly unrealistic in terms of recruitment potential and trial management arrangements. It is probably better to apply for a feasibility study that has a clear trajectory for a definitive trial which can then be funded by the HTA programme.

I am not giving any “secrets” away by writing this article. All the information and guidance is available on the very well written and organised CCF website. Research for Patient benefit offers a superb opportunity for the dermatology community to undertake clinically relevant and important research. Please take advantage of it.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Prof Celia Davies for her valuable comments on an early draft.

## References

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3. RfPB Frequently asked questions.  
[://www.nihr-ccf.org.uk/site/programmes/rfpb/faq/default](http://www.nihr-ccf.org.uk/site/programmes/rfpb/faq/default). (accessed 4th March 2008)

### **Box 1: Seven Top tips to consider when applying for RfPB**

- Read the programme guidance including programme director's messages
- Make sure your application describes clearly how the research will benefit patients
- Build a team with a wide range of methodological and content and context skills in your team
- Make contact with your local Research Design Service\* for methodological support
- Don't try and sneak mechanism research into the programme – it is likely to be rejected o scope
- Make sure you have convincing and appropriate lay/public involvement
- Get someone in your local organisation to peer review and check over your application

\* [://www.nihr-ccf.org.uk/site/programmes/rds/default](http://www.nihr-ccf.org.uk/site/programmes/rds/default).