

Arthritis Australia National Research Program 2017-18

The objectives of the Arthritis Australia National Research Program are to support:

- specific research projects into arthritis and other musculoskeletal disorders,
- research into areas of interest held by and of benefit to health consumers; and
- foster the career development of Australian scientists and clinical investigators committed to research into arthritis and allied disorders.

Translational research, an increased emphasis from 2016

Applicants are asked to explain in detail how their project will produce a benefit to health consumers e.g. improve quality of life for patients with musculoskeletal disease or advance knowledge in clinical areas where there is therapeutic uncertainty.

- One project grant will be allocated specifically to a project with a translational emphasis
- The Research Grants Assessment Committee reserves the right not to award any grant if there is no application of sufficient merit that fulfils the relevant criteria.

Projects eligible for funding

Grants-in-aid and project grants

Grants-in-aid are typically for short-term projects with well defined aims, which can be achieved within a 12 month period. In some cases, these grants-in-aid address particular questions, which complement larger established programs of research. However, previous funding by Arthritis Australia and potential overlap with funding from other sources is taken into account. Young investigators and those undertaking allied health research are the only people eligible for these grants. Project grants are for larger amounts of money (up to \$50,000 per annum) for substantial projects which are generally undertaken by experienced researchers to generate important results on their own or to improve the potential to achieve government funding.

Scholarships

Arthritis Australia offers scholarships for young science and medical graduates to undertake thesis studies into arthritis and related disorders at recognised universities. These scholarships provide research training to doctorate or masters level and are designed to develop the intellectual and technical expertise required for a career involving laboratory and clinical investigation. Scholarships are intended, in general, to support basic and clinical research training within Australian research units and as a precursor to more advanced study in Australia and overseas. Scholarships are for one year and are renewable for three years, depending on progress and funding priorities.

Fellowships

Research Fellowships are intended for post-doctoral research work.

Arthritis Australia offers one fellowship for clinical or scientific research for scientists with several years' post-graduate experience. It is tenable in Australia (or overseas) for one year but – depending on progress and funding priorities – are possibly renewable for two years.

The Grants Assessment Committee

The Grants Assessment Committee provides expert review and assessment of the annual applications submitted to Arthritis Australia for research scholarships, fellowships and grants-in-aid and makes recommendations for their funding to the Arthritis Australia Board.

Each year, approximately 10 individuals with appropriate research and health consumer credentials, experience and current standing are invited to join the Grants Assessment Committee. Their services are provided voluntarily - only their travel and meeting expenses are paid for by Arthritis Australia.

Collectively, the committee is required to have ample expertise to rank competing research applications covering a range of research topics within the musculoskeletal diseases area.

Peer review process

Grants-in-aid and project grants

The Grants Assessment Committee (GAC) functions in a similar way to that of National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) review committees, using the guiding principle of independent peer review. Each application is carefully assessed by two spokespersons and other members of the committee, who are all expected to have examined each application. The grants are examined for importance of questions asked, novelty, rationale, point of departure with published literature, appropriateness of methodology, feasibility and experimental design, including the extent to which experiments address explicit hypotheses. The applicant's track record, including experience with techniques to be used, is also weighed in the assessment, but is usually less of a determining factor compared to NHMRC. It is expected that an explicit, justified budget be provided as part of the application.

After discussion, the spokesperson proposes an alphabetical score (A to E) with positive and negative notions adding finer grades. The score is then discussed and the final score decided by consensus. Generally, grants ranking in the A and B categories are funded, although the grading is such that C ranking grants (especially those in the C+ category) are regarded as fundable, and may receive funding in special categories where competition is less intense (most often where a grant is tied to a particular topic or geographical location).

Unfortunately, the competitive nature of the allocation process and limited availability of funds mean that some worthwhile projects are not funded. Every year, on average, Arthritis Australia funds one third of applications. These are often independent, innovative projects that would not get funding elsewhere but which might provide the start of a new way of thinking about a treatment or disease.

Involvement of active researchers in the Grants Assessment Committee means that members may be directly or indirectly associated with some applications. However, committee members stand aside from all discussion related to these applications.

Scholarships and fellowships

In view of limited amounts of funding available, a priority is to encourage new researchers who are then subsequently in a stronger position to apply for an award from other agencies, such as NHMRC. Scholarship and fellowship applications are ranked independently in order of merit by all members of the Grants Assessment Committee. The rankings of the GAC members are tabled at the review meeting and form the basis for a composite ranking upon which recommendations for funding are based.

Logistics

The closing date is generally late June. Submissions are made electronically. A Grants Assessment Committee teleconference is held shortly after the closing date in order to allocate spokespersons. The committee meets face-to-face end-September/early-October to review all applications and decide allocations for recommendation to the Arthritis Australia Board.

The Arthritis Australia Board reviews/approves the GAC recommendations at their November meeting.

Formal offers, in writing, are made to successful candidates and the finalisation of the following year grants is completed by early February.

Funding source and guidelines

Cash or share portfolio contributions for the annual research program are received from Arthritis Australia and State/Territory research-specific fundraising programs; bequests; general donations; and tied grants from businesses and the community for a disease-specific area (i.e. a corpus or agreed annual contribution). Note: corpus funding incurs an annual administration fee – charged on a sliding scale, dependent upon the size of the corpus and the nature of the investment portfolio.

All effort is taken to promote and allocate disease-specific grants. However, if the Grants Assessment Committee believes the applications received are not of appropriate standard, the funds will be allocated to a project deemed to meet Arthritis Australia objectives and guidelines.

As success in the NHMRC funding program is one of the goals of Arthritis Australia's research strategy, applicants submitting a research proposal which is subsequently awarded NHMRC funding in the same calendar year, will no longer be eligible to receive funds from Arthritis Australia for this proposal.

The total budget for the Arthritis Australia National Research Program is dictated by what funds have been raised in the year leading up to the review. Amounts can vary from \$500-\$900,000 per annum. The funding split is as follows:

Grants

\$10-\$15,000 for new investigator or allied health grants

\$40-50,000 for project grants

Scholarships

\$20-25,000

Fellowship

\$50,000 (AFA-ARA Heald Fellowship, since 1983)