

Arthritis Australia Grants Assessment Committee—Terms of Reference

The objectives of the Research Program of Arthritis Australia are:

- To support specific research projects into arthritis and other musculoskeletal disorders, and
- To support and foster the career development of scientists and clinical investigators committed to research into arthritis and allied disorders

The Grants Assessment Committee

The Chair of the Grant Assessment Committee (GAC) is appointed by, and reports to the Board of Arthritis Australia. The Chair oversees the process of reviewing the applications, collation of the scores, selection of successful applications and allocation of funds, taking into account the principles of the GAC and ensuring that conflicts of interest are managed as outlined below.

Purpose of the GAC

To provide expert review and assessment of applications for research scholarships, fellowships, project grants and grants-in-aid received each year by Arthritis Australia and to make recommendations for funding to the Board of Arthritis Australia.

Composition of the GAC

The GAC comprises a minimum of eight and up to a maximum of 10 individuals with appropriate research credentials, experience and current standing, who collectively are able to provide ample expertise to rank competing research application covering a range of research topics within the musculoskeletal diseases area. This includes the Medical Director of Arthritis Australia. A minimum of two members representing each of the following fields is preferred: rheumatology, allied health/biomechanics, basic science research and health consumers who bring a consumer perspective to the assessment of grant applications. Members are nominated by the Chair, in conjunction with the Medical Director. The Chief Executive Officer of Arthritis Australia may attend if additional consumer input is required.

Term of committee membership is to be a limit of 5 years in general. Members may be re-appointed on a year by year basis if there are no alternative appointees from their field. For the committee to retain some corporate memory turnover of members to be staggered between years.

The term of the Chair may exceed the general term of 5 years, subject to the approval of the Board of Arthritis Australia. The term of the Medical Director of Arthritis Australia will be for the duration of their tenure in the Medical Director role. The process of tracking duration of membership is to be managed by Arthritis Australia.

National Research Program**Scholarships:**

Arthritis Australia offers scholarships for young science and medical graduates to higher degree by research 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.

Arthritis Australia Grants Assessment Committee—Terms of Reference**Fellowships:**

Research fellowships are available for post-doctoral work or following recently completed rheumatology advanced training and are available for research programs both overseas and in Australia. Fellowships are for one year. Applicants may be eligible for an alternative fellowship in subsequent years depending on progress and funding priorities.

Project Grants and Grants-in-Aid:

Project Grants and Grants in Aid are typically for short-term projects with well-defined aims and budgets which can be achieved in a 12 month period. Grants in Aid will be available only for new investigators* or allied health researchers, excluding physiotherapists unless they meet the criteria of a 'New investigator' (defined as within six years of receiving their PhD).

Peer review process**Selection criteria**

The GAC functions in a similar way to that of National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) review committees, using the guiding principle of peer review.

Scholarships and Fellowships:

All scholarship and fellowship applications are ranked independently by each member of the Grants Committee and successful applications are those that are highest ranked. Emphasis is placed on the individual's track record although the supervisor's track record, the scientific merit and the feasibility of the project are also taken into account.

Project Grants and Grants in Aid:

Grants are allocated to two spokespersons that present each grant and then open up discussion by the whole panel.

The grants and grants in aid 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 and translational potential. 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. For project grants, the track record of the team is considered but for grants in aid, only the track record of the principle investigator is taken into account.

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). Applications are funded from the highest rated down until funding runs out, taking into account grants that are tied to research of a particular topic or for researchers from a particular geographic location. Those ranked below the cut off are considered reserves in case a successful application declines, provided the GAC considers them to be of sufficient merit. Unfortunately, the competitive nature of the allocation process and limited availability of funds mean that some worthwhile projects are not funded.

Arthritis Australia Grants Assessment Committee—Terms of Reference**Principles of allocating funds:**

1. To support researchers who are young and emerging and who are then subsequently in a stronger position to apply for an award from other agencies, such as NHMRC.
2. To support preliminary work that will be at a greater chance of leveraging larger funds eg NHMRC.
3. To be fair and equitable in distributing funds to researchers from different research groups, different Australian states and territories and for different musculoskeletal conditions to promote Australian musculoskeletal research in the future. More than one scholarship and/or fellowship may be awarded to individuals from the same research group but it is unlikely that a research group will receive more than one project grant in the same year.
4. To optimise access to funds: The GAC can re-categorise applications and determine if for instance a 'Project Grant' application can be awarded with partial funding as a 'Grant-in-aid' instead. They may also consider applications across various categories e.g. scholarships and fellowships. 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. Similarly, recipients cannot hold more than one fellowship in any given year and will no longer be eligible to receive funds from Arthritis Australia should they be successful at receiving another fellowship e.g. from the RACP

It will be recommended in the "Frequently Asked Questions" on the Arthritis Australia website, that applicants limit project grant applications to one per year and that no financial support will be given for publication costs or infrastructure.

Next Steps

Applications for Arthritis Australia National Research Program open in April and close after two months. The application form, guidelines, frequently asked questions and other information are posted on the Arthritis Australia website and are available on the website all year. A teleconference is held shortly after the closing date in order to allocate spokespersons 1 and 2 for each project grant and each grant-in-aid. The GAC meeting to review the rankings of the scholarships and fellowships and to rank the project grants and grants-in-aid is held in August. The provision of spokesperson's reports to unsuccessful applicants has not been feasible due to limited resources but would be desirable to assist applicants to improve subsequent submissions.

Conflicts of Interest

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 and scoring related to these applications.

At the beginning of each GAC meeting, the Chair shall call for any conflicts of interest and record these. Committee members who have a conflict of interest leave the room while that particular application is being discussed.

Graeme Jones, Chair, Grants Assessment Committee
Susanna Proudman, Medical Director, Arthritis Australia