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

- research projects into arthritis and other musculoskeletal disease,
- 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 musculoskeletal disease.

Translational research, an increased emphasis since 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 arthritis and musculoskeletal disease or advance knowledge in clinical areas of therapeutic uncertainty. It is intended that at least one project grant will be allocated specifically to a project with a translational emphasis.

Projects eligible for funding:

a) Grants-in-aid:

Typically up to \$20,000 per annum for short-term projects with well-defined aims, which can be achieved within a 12-month period. In some cases, grants-in-aid will address questions which complement established programs of research. Only new investigators and those undertaking allied health research are eligible for these grants, excluding physiotherapists unless they meet the criteria of a 'New investigator' (defined as within six years of receiving their PhD). Previous funding from Arthritis Australia and potential overlap with other sources of funding is taken into account.

b) Project Grants:

Larger amounts of funding (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 likelihood of achieving government funding.

c) ARA Research Fund Private Practice Grant:

Up to \$40,000, the lead investigator must be a financial ARA member who wishes to conduct a research program in private practice. The applicant must be employed in private practice for more than 60% of work time (applicant must provide statement in section 4). The applicant must have an academic mentor who is an ARA member. The investigator must be based and conduct the research project in Australia. The research is to be conducted within one year.

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d) ARA Research Fund Philip Robinson Memorial Award:

This award is in memory of the late Philip Robinson. The grant for 2024 will be \$50,000 and awarded for research on any rheumatological or musculoskeletal health topic. The research must be collaborative and preferably with international collaboration. The recipient will be a middle career researcher (5 to 12 years of RACP fellowship or equivalent with flexibility depending on personal circumstances). In addition, the recipient must be a financial member of the ARA or NZRA.

e) ARA Research Fund Ken Muirden Overseas Fellowship:

Up to \$100,000, This grant is designed to give a rheumatologist who is about to or has completed advanced training in Rheumatology within the last two years an opportunity to undertake further clinical or research training overseas in an approved institution in any country. This fellowship is funded by the Australian Rheumatology Association Research Fund.

f) Scholarships:

Arthritis Australia offers scholarships (up to \$50,000) for young science and medical graduates to undertake thesis studies into arthritis and musculoskeletal 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/or 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. Scholarship awards are for one year.

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 project grants, grants-in-aid and makes recommendations for their funding to the Arthritis Australia Board.

Each year, approximately 10 people, including consumer representatives, clinicians and researchers are invited to join the Grants Assessment Committee. Their services are provided voluntarily.

Collectively, the committee provides the necessary expertise to rank competing research applications covering a range of research topics within the arthritis and 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 reviews. 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.

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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. The final score is 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 the 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 may 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 occasionally committee members may be directly or indirectly associated with some applications. However, where there is a conflict of interest, the committee members stand aside from all discussion related to those applications.

Scholarships and fellowships:

In view of the 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 are tabled at the meeting and form the basis for a composite ranking upon which recommendations for funding are based.

NEXT STEPS:

The **closing date for submissions is 5pm on the 7th of July 2023**. Submissions must be made electronically. The Grants Assessment Committee will meet in August to review all applications and decide allocations for recommendation to the Arthritis Australia Board.

The Arthritis Australia Board reviews/approves the GAC recommendations. Formal offers, in writing, are then made to successful candidates.

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FUNDING SOURCE AND GUIDELINES:

Donations for the annual research program are received from Arthritis Australia, the ARA Research Fund, State and Territory research-specific fundraising programs; bequests; general donations; and tied grants from businesses and the community for a disease-specific area.

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 may 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. 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.

The total budget for the Arthritis Australia National Research Program is dictated by the amount of funding which has been raised in the year leading up to the awards.