Cardiovascular News

Triage at the NHLBI

Common Sense

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We would like to focus on peer review of grant applications at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), particularly on the use of triage to increase the efficiency of the review process. This topic initially received considerable attention at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the mid-1980s because of the need to expedite review of AIDS-related research applications. An interim policy on triage was prepared by the NIH Review Policy Committee, establishing that triage decisions were to be made by peers, not by NIH staff. That policy forms the basis for the triage process recently put into use at the NHLBI.

The institute's current approach reflects a pressing need to reduce the personnel and administrative costs associated with conducting special reviews. The NHLBI Review Branch provides initial scientific review for all grant applications and contract proposals received from requests for grant applications (RFAs) and requests for contract proposals (RFPs), program projects, institutional training grants, clinical trials, and other specialized programs totaling nearly $1 billion in requested funds annually. The process includes selecting peer reviewers, organizing review meetings, and preparing summary statements.

The triage procedure we have begun to use for grant applications is currently directed almost entirely toward responses to RFAs, which constitute a significant portion of the review branch's workload. Between March 18 and August 2, 1993, the review branch directed a total of 30 review committee meetings for 15 RFAs with a total of 479 applications. The projected number of awards from the RFAs was 81 to 90, as specified in the solicitations. Given the fact that only 15% to 20% of the applications submitted for the RFAs could be funded, it seemed reasonable to focus efforts on a detailed examination of the subset of applications that had a realistic chance of success in each competition.

Accordingly, the mailing of review materials to review committee members included special instructions with respect to assessing the relative competitiveness of applications. Reviewers were told that they would be expected to categorize each application assigned to them as clearly competitive, possibly competitive, probably not competitive, or clearly noncompetitive. They were asked to prepare a full critique of all assigned applications in the usual manner.

At the meeting, each reviewer (primary, secondary, and reader plus anyone else familiar with the application) rendered an assessment of the level of competitiveness of each application. After the votes were tallied, each application was summarized and declared to be either competitive or noncompetitive. It is important to note that if any individual reviewer believed that an application should be considered competitive and could supply cogent reasons, that application was categorized as competitive—thus, differences of opinion were resolved in favor of the applicant.

In general, the number of applications declared competitive was two to three times the number of anticipated awards in a particular solicitation. For example, for one RFA in which 33 applications vied for four or five awards, 12 applications were considered competitive. They were fully reviewed using customary procedures. A complete summary statement was prepared for each, synthesizing reviewers' comments and discussion.

The noncompetitive applications did not undergo further review, and no summary statement was prepared. Rather, within a week of the meeting, the original reviewers' comments, essentially unedited, were mailed to each applicant. The reviewers had been advised of this in their special instructions. This rapid turnaround contrasts favorably with the 4-to-6-week period that is usually required to produce summary statements and is beneficial to applicants who wish to revise and resubmit applications quickly. A further benefit of this approach stems from the fact that an application resubmitted after an RFA review in which it is judged noncompetitive is not associated with the prior review; thus, it enters the subsequent review with essentially a clean slate.

Another advantage of this triage process is that the review meeting itself claims substantially less of the reviewers' time. For example, review of the RFA cited above was completed in an evening and a morning as opposed to the evening and almost 2 days that a traditional review would have required. Furthermore, the reviewers felt that the process allowed for a more thorough review, since they could concentrate on the strongest applications.

The major saving in time from the triage process accrues to the review staff. It takes an experienced scientific review administrator (formerly "executive secretary") about half a day to produce a final summary statement for an application in an RFA competition. Having to prepare only 12 summary statements rather than 33 resulted in a savings of about 10 working days. Even if triage were used only for RFAs and only half of the applications received were deemed noncompetitive, this approach could save more than one person-year of review staff time annually. In times of budgetary con-
straints and staff reductions, this is highly significant for the institute.

Because this approach is a departure from that used more traditionally by the NIH, we want the research community to be aware of our efforts. Although the current triage procedures apply almost entirely to RFAs, there is no compelling reason why they could not be extended to other mechanisms. Indeed, it may make good sense to do so. In our approach to triage, we believe we have found a mechanism for increasing efficiency while maintaining the high quality of our reviews.
Triage at the NHLBI. Common sense.
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