

Spinal Research: Research Priorities and Grant Application Process

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Last month I outlined the Australian Spinal Research Foundation's aim over the next few articles to share information with our membership and the profession at large from each of the following areas:

- Review the new Australian Spinal Research Foundation vision (April edition of TAC).
- Discuss the upgrading of the research grant application process that has been undertaken to ensure our funding is best placed to support our vision (this edition of TAC).
- Give a 'nutshell' description of the strategic plan for the coming year (June edition of TAC).

The purpose of these three articles being to give CAA members more insight into the Foundation. I boldly stated 'a new age is dawning!' and raved about how impressed I was with the Foundation, Board, CEO and core office team, being the newest member of the Board and relatively recently inducted.

Since then I had the opportunity to attend a conference sponsored by the Australian Institute of Company Directors on 'Evaluating the Not-For-Profit Boards'. Board membership carries certain responsibilities and potential liabilities and I wanted to get some sort of external check or validation that we are on the right path.

The speakers were Alice McDougall, special counsel for Freehills law firm ('Not-For-Profit boards' is her specialty), Peter Joseph OAM FAICD, Chairman, St James Ethics Centre and Wendy McCarthy AO, Chairman, Sydney Community Foundation (past chairman of PLAN Australia). The event was very informative, and also reassuring in that my positive assessment of the Board's functioning was shown to be accurate.

Key elements in running a successful board are:

- building trust between members
- having an induction process
- members working hard on belonging to the community they are involved with
- having a clear vision which serves to inspire everyday operations
- having a workable (effective) strategic plan
- having a clearly defined charter and roles

In short, the ASRF Board ticked all these boxes, and based on what was discussed, including the 'real life' examples presented, are miles in front of many 'not-for-profit' boards who according to the speakers have little of the above in place, even though they may be handling millions of dollars in funds!

This is not only comforting to me as a new Board member, but exciting to me as a chiropractor, because it is a demonstration of how, with your support, we are poised to be able to grow exponentially and really achieve some big results for chiropractic through research.

So... To the research (in a nutshell!). In order to grow our research community and continue to fund focused research in a sustainable way, structures need to be in place. In 2007 the Board established a research culture statement reflective of our vision and culture. Research priorities are then set for the year (funding round). The research priorities are 2-fold:

- **Basic Research:** Vertebral subluxation based research
- **Clinical Research:** How does an adjustment impact the spine, nerve function, quality of life, and global health?

Research EOI (Expressions of Interest) are called for in April where researchers are invited to submit a two page summary of their intended proposal. This is a preliminary step whereby research initiatives can be articulated succinctly to allow a determination of the likelihood of funding. Submitting an EOI prior to the grant

application potentially saves the researcher committing extensive time to prepare a full grant application and the RC (Research Committee) and the CAP (Clinical Advisory Panel) expending valuable time reviewing more extensive applications that may not be likely to achieve funding.

The CAP reviews, scores and advises the Board on the level of alignment each EOI appears to have with the Foundations research priorities, and also the likely relevance of each one to clinical practice. Independently, the RC also reviews the EOI and makes recommendations to the Board on

the likely scientific quality of the applications and which EOI merit being invited to submit a full grant application.

Based on these recommendations, the Board invites a number of the researchers who submitted EOI to submit a full grant application. Once the full grant applications have been received, the RC organizes peer review for each application, and uses those reviews to fully assess each one. This year, the CAP will also be asked to assess the full applications, ensuring the clinical point of view remains in the process. The RC will then meet to determine its final recommendations to the board. Based upon these recommendations, and taking into account any other necessary factors (fiscal for example), the Board then makes the ultimate decision on which applicants receive funding. Last year, 12 EOI were received, and 4 were invited to fully submit. Three of those were then ultimately funded.

In 2008 new, best practice funding conditions are being established which include regular reporting requirements, and assurances from both grant holders and their institution that the project will be adequately resourced with required infrastructure, outside of the Foundation funding, to ensure its success.

The RC and CAP utilize a scoring sheet for EOI with set criteria to be assessed, and also the opportunity to offer opinions about study validity and relevance to research priorities. In 2007 the correlation of scores between the RC and the CAP was very high. This may indicate that the submitting researchers had a very clear understanding of the research priorities as stated by the Foundation.

The independent scoring of the two groups becomes very important if the correlation is low. For instance the EOI/research grant application may score highly by the RC because of its scientific merit in terms of sound study structure and validity, yet receive a low score from the CAP because its hypothesis doesn't demonstrate that it will lend weight to our knowledge base furthering the understanding, development and effectiveness of chiropractic care. Conversely, while the CAP may rate a study highly on desirability from a chiropractor's point of view, if it is not a well structured, valid study design, then it will not pass

the RC's assessment. Either way, the process is necessarily rigorous, to ensure that all research funded is of a high quality and is highly relevant to supporting our mission.

If you are interested in a more full description of the above I refer you to Dr Ray Hayek's Research Committee Report (pages 5 & 6) in the Australian Spinal Research Foundation's 2006/2007 report. If you would like a copy of the report please contact the office (07) 3808 4098. Thank you again to our members and supporters who make all this possible, your ongoing support of our profession is really appreciated!

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