

## **POLICY GUIDELINES FOR ADVISORY COMMITTEES AND GRANT REVIEWERS**

### **A. CONTEXT**

The Donaghue Foundation, in carrying out the purpose of its benefactor, Ethel F. Donaghue, engages in deliberate policy and program development and in rigorous scientific reviews of many grant applications each year, using the services of various advisers and of reviewers drawn either from our panel of scientific advisers or from ad hoc volunteers having expertise otherwise unavailable to us. The Foundation also engages experts to aid in policy and program development; these individuals are drawn from our policy and scientific advisers and from others outside the foundation having relevant expertise. In the course of working with outside experts, the Foundation deals with information that is sensitive and technical. The Foundation seeks to maintain standards of conduct that are consistent with practices in the philanthropic and research communities and adherent to the highest professional and ethical standards. The Trustees recognize that having a primary Connecticut focus and a small staff requires a careful ongoing balancing of the ideals and practicalities of fair and impartial grant review; many persons whose assistance can be very helpful to us have obligations or allegiances that could affect their objectivity. We want to assure ourselves of adequate ongoing outside assistance by being realistic and practical in our policies aimed at assuring objectivity. At the same time, we wish to maintain both the reality and public perception that the Foundation fairly and objectively rewards good science.

### **B. PURPOSE**

The following guidelines are intended to assist persons who work with the Foundation in its health research grant-making activities. The guidelines are to provide information about the Foundation's general expectations and to set out specific parameters of interaction with the Foundation and with others who submit information to it for the purpose of obtaining grant support.

### **C. GUIDELINES**

#### **1. PAYMENT FOR ADVISORY SERVICES**

The Foundation pays modest honoraria for advisory and grant review work. The amounts recognize the primary motivation of volunteers and do not reflect the fair value of their contribution, but the payment of stipends does express the appreciation of the Foundations and also stresses the importance of the volunteers' work. Honorari are set at amounts that do reflect to a degree the relative amounts of time and effort involved in various reviews. Reasonable expenses for travel from out of state are reimbursed.

## 2. CONDUCT OF REVIEWS

The Foundation has a small staff, which does a great deal of administrative work in support of advisory committees and grant reviews. The recruiting of reviewers is very labor-intensive, and once a team of reviewers has been selected, the staff relies upon timely completion of reviews to support the committee process. It is expected that any person accepting the responsibility for reviewing grant applications will make a commitment to complete his or her work and submit it to Foundation staff in timely fashion so that applications are not prejudiced by missing reviews.

Those assigned to do primary reviews for presentation at committee meetings should be particularly careful to submit written reviews in timely fashion. The Foundation staff will make every effort to assist this process. Reviewers should make every effort to attend review committee meetings since an important part of decision-making derives from committee discussion of applications.

Foundation staff have been instructed to be supportive of all reasonable requests made by reviewers and advisory committee members, who are asked to respect the staff's workload and be courteous and prompt in responding to requests from staff. If a reviewer's situation changes and jeopardizes timely completion of review work, reviewers should promptly notify Foundation staff.

Staff will inform reviewers of scoring conventions and other guidelines to be used for any review.

## 3. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

**Practical objectivity.** The Foundation's view of facts influencing the objectivity of a reviewer is derived from a practical awareness of the breadth of research topics reviewed, the small size of the state of Connecticut, the difficulty in assuring regular attendance at committee meetings by out-of-state reviewers, the Foundation's preference for a certain continuity of reviewers, and the consequent limit on the number of reviewers available who are comfortable with submitted topics.

**Individual Reviews.** The following factors should guide both Foundation staff in assigning reviews and reviewers in deciding whether to accept or decline an assignment. First, the judgment of the reviewer is determinative; if a reviewer feels discomfort about his or her own objectivity, a review should be declined.

Secondly, having said that, a reviewer should not consider objectivity impaired on the basis of attenuated relationships, such as coming from the same university or even the same school or department, if the unit is large and the interaction with an applicant remote.

A serious individual judgment that balances familiarity, the need of the grant process for reviewers, and perceptions of fairness (here it should be noted that neither the Foundation nor any reviewer should identify any reviewer with any specific review, whether before or after a decision is made) should be the basis for accepting or declining an assignment.

Familiarity that would ordinarily require self-disqualification includes a strong personal relationship with an applicant, a strong history of working with the applicant, a current working relationship, or a committed opinion about the applicant, pro or con. A reviewer who disqualifies himself or herself from a review should not be present during a committee discussion of the subject application.

**Committee proceedings.** The Foundation perceives an important distinction between service as a primary reviewer and participation in a committee discussion; an individual may consider it inappropriate to conduct a primary review but at the same time properly contribute to a discussion. An important element of fairness in reviews is a proper disclosure of a relationship that a reviewer believes could affect, or could be perceived as affecting his or her opinions. If a reviewer has declined a primary review on the basis of a felt conflict but intends to participate in committee discussion, he or she should disclose the declination to the committee.

#### **4. ETHICS ISSUES**

The Foundation places a high value on adherence to ethical conduct in research and wishes to promote research that properly safeguards human and animal subjects. The Foundation wants no association with scientific misconduct of any sort and considers it to be its responsibility to be actively alert for it. The Foundation considers that reviewers have a responsibility to science and to the Foundation to identify ethical problems which may arise in the course of grant review. If an unresolved ethics issue is the basis for a reviewer's inclination to reject an application, that fact should be made known to the review committee chairman and a resolution considered. It is anticipated that ethics issues may arise even if an application has been reviewed by an institutional review board.

Discussion of ethics concerns and any outcome of any such discussion should be kept in confidence, with any outside communication being handled by Foundation staff after direction by the Trustees with the advice of the review committee chairman.

#### **5. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reviewers should not disclose either their role in any specific review or any information about the review process or outcome. The Foundation will not disclose any identifying information about individual reviewers without express consent of the reviewer.

Any information a reviewer may wish to convey to an applicant should be given to the Foundation staff, who will handle all communications with applicants. Staff will give written feedback to applicants, extracted from written reviews and committee discussion, but will not identify the specific source of any feedback.

## **6. DISCRETION IN USE OF INFORMATION**

Access to information about applicants and applications is granted to reviewers solely for the purpose of grant review. No other use of any such information should be made by any reviewer unless and until it becomes generally available to the science community through publication.

A grant recipient may deem information derived from funded research to be proprietary and may intend to secure intellectual property protection before publication. Reviewers may continue to be involved in funded research in an oversight role and may thereby have access to such information. It must be treated as confidential, and such reviewers may be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement as assurance of respect for recipients' interests.

Even in cases where information is not confidential, it is expected that discretion will be used.