

## DEBRA INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH REVIEW PROCESS

### 1. What is currently undertaken on an international basis?

1. Evaluation of research grant applications made directly by applicants to DEBRA International, or referred to DEBRA International by national EB support groups, is dealt with centrally. This ensures that all such applications are evaluated by experts using consistent criteria to determine the importance of the work proposed, assess the ability of the applicants to undertake the work, and advice on the appropriate level of grant, if any.
2. The provision of funding is the responsibility of national DEBRA groups – there is, at present, no international research fund. Following central evaluation and any recommendation of funding, it is the decision of national groups whether to offer funding and to manage the payment of the grant. Joint funding by more than one national group is negotiated by DEBRA International with the relevant groups.
3. Until recently, most national groups only provided funding for research undertaken in their own country, although there have been exceptions to this. DEBRA UK has been the majority funder of research referred to as DEBRA International, and has both welcomed applications for funding for research undertaken outside the UK and funded such research. DEBRA Ireland has also funded research in the UK and the USA, and DEBRA Austria has provided major international funding since 2009.
4. Strategic thinking is also best dealt with at the international level. The 1999 consensus meeting, hosted by DEBRA Europe and DEBRA of America, defined research priorities for funding for the period 2000-2006. Revision of priorities takes place continuously through input from the DEBRA International Medical and Scientific Advisory Panel (see below). Strategic review following the EB 2006 Dublin, and EB 2009 Vienna, consensus meetings led to reconsideration and focusing of priorities, and the preparation of a DEBRA International Research Strategy, which also proposes the creation of a Translational Research Strategy Board (see below in 'Future Directions').

## **2. How are research grant applications encouraged?**

1. Each national group is responsible for advertising its own research grants scheme, if any, in the way it chooses which may depend on the level of funding available. Many groups will not have any capacity to fund research; others may advertise their scheme informally, whilst others may advertise in journals and other media.
2. Notice of research-grant rounds is announced on the DEBRA International website, and by direct e-mailing to key EB research groups worldwide. The DEBRA International website holds the DEBRA UK application form, and other information on the terms and conditions for grants, and the application procedure.
3. Whatever the route by which research-funding applications are received by DEBRA International, all undergo the same centralised peer-review process, overseen by the DEBRA International Medical and Scientific Advisory Panel (MSAP).

## **3. What happens when applications are received?**

1. Applications are normally considered twice a year, with deadlines for the receipt of applications of 15 March and 15 September.
2. The assessment process of DEBRA International is managed by DEBRA UK on behalf of all of the national groups. Applications made to any member group must be received in hard copy and electronically by DEBRA UK by the deadline dates.
3. The basis of all grant evaluation in any reputable medical research organisation is peer review - that is, the process of obtaining independent, expert opinions on the applications received and the making of recommendations based on the quality and feasibility of the proposed research, its value for money and, in our case, its relevance to the medical condition EB.
4. On receipt of the applications, suggestions are sought from the Chair and other members of the Medical and Scientific Advisory Panel for external referees. These are people with expertise in the particular area of research relevant to each individual application. Each application is sent to at least three external referees with a request for an evaluation of the application. A Referee's Report form guides the referee as to the type of information and opinion required. No fee is paid to external referees. Reports are usually requested within six weeks.

5. The external referees' reports, together with the applications, are submitted to the Medical and Scientific Advisory Panel. At present, the Panel comprises members with specialist interest in EB and "independent" scientists who have expertise in the relevant areas of science but are not, primarily, EB specialists.

The current MSAP members are:

Prof. Jo-David Fine (USA) Chair

Prof. Leena Bruckner-Tuderman (Germany) Deputy Chair

Prof. Robin Eady (UK)

Prof. Peter Humphries (Ireland)

Prof. Jouni Uitto (USA)

Prof. Helmut Hintner (Austria)

Prof. Thomas Magin (Germany)

Prof. Giovanna Zambruno (Italy)

Dr. Adrian Heagerty (UK)

Dr. John Marshall (UK)

Dr. Jemma Mellerio (UK)

Membership of MSAP is reviewed intermittently to ensure that its expertise reflects the range of disciplines required in EB research, current and emerging technologies and directions of research, and geographic representation of countries engaged in EB research.

6. The Panel meets twice a year, currently in London, and normally in June and December to consider grant applications. All applications are discussed, with different members of the Panel taking the lead for each application in describing the work to be undertaken, the comments made by the external referees and any particular issues which require debate. Full discussion then takes place and each member scores the application out of 100 (0 = no support, 100 = highest possible recommendation). The scores are collated after all of the applications have been discussed and an average score calculated for each application.
7. All applications, regardless of the country of submission, and possible funding availability, are considered under the same criteria of research quality, value and relevance to EB.

8. Following discussion and scoring, a threshold is applied to identify those applications to be recommended for funding. In general, applications scoring less than 70 are unlikely to be recommended for funding unless specific, national circumstances apply (see below). Those applications above the threshold are then considered in detail to determine whether the level of grant requested is appropriate or should be reduced, whether there are comments which should be passed on to the applicant to enable improvement of the project design, and whether there are particular conditions to be imposed regarding execution of the project upon which funding should depend.
9. The recommendations of the Panel are then conveyed directly to the applicant and, in the case of referred applications, to the national groups to whom the application has been made.

#### **4. Provision of funding**

1. The final decision on whether to fund a particular project rests with the Board of the national DEBRA group to whom the application has been made, or has indicated an interest in supporting the research. The decision should be made on the basis of the availability of funding for the project.
2. Whilst each group is autonomous, seeking separate, national scientific advice is strongly discouraged as unnecessary and counter to DEBRA International's policy of evaluating all applications according to the same criteria.
3. Each national group submitting applications for consideration by MSAP is responsible for informing their applicants of the outcome and any special terms relating to grants awarded.

#### **5. Management of research grants**

1. It is for each group to determine how they wish to manage the process, once a grant has been awarded. The procedure used by DEBRA UK is described below as an example.
2. The grant offer is made in writing to successful applicants. This details the amount of the grant to be awarded, the number of years for which the grant is made, the date from which funding will be available and any special conditions. DEBRA UK's standard terms are attached to the letter and applicants are required to sign a copy of the letter to confirm that they accept those terms.

3. Grants are paid quarterly in arrears to the institution in which the grant holder works, on receipt of a detailed invoice.
4. Annual progress reports are required during the life of the grant (including a final report). These reports must cover the work undertaken, the results achieved, comparison of actual results to those anticipated in the application, an explanation for any discrepancies and any other relevant information. The information required in both the interim annual and final reports is detailed in a document made available to all grantholders, and on the DEBRA International website.
5. These reports are received and assessed by the DEBRA International Research Manager, and are then discussed as appropriate with the MSAP Chair, Deputy Chair, and other MSAP members as appropriate. The Research Manager and/or MSAP can either recommend that the report be accepted as it stands, ask for clarification where there are minor areas to be resolved or register concern where there are fundamental problems with the work. In the latter case, the annual report is sent to external reviewers and, if the concern is shared, action be taken to remedy the problem. This may include withdrawal of the grant.
6. Grant holders are required to publicise the results of their funded research by publishing in the scientific journals, presentations at conferences, exhibitions of posters and so on. When appropriate, research reports are published on the website.

## **6. National restrictions**

1. As previously noted, many national groups can only fund research in their own countries. It is open to these groups, when they submit the applications to the central assessment process, to ask that this be taken into account.
2. In such instances, the applications go through the standard assessment process and are scored in the normal way. However, if the application scores lower than the threshold the Panel can give an opinion on whether the application is "good enough" for funding from these restricted, national funds. This recognises the need for research bases in those countries and to enable new researchers to develop the expertise to become leading players at a later date.
3. The recommendations of MSAP are reported to the national group in the normal way for decision and action.

4. In the longer term, we hope that these national restrictions will become less common, allowing funds to be allocated solely on the basis of competition.

## 7. Participative funding

1. In most circumstances, funding is provided by the national group receiving the application. However, it is possible for joint funding arrangements to be agreed in appropriate circumstances.
2. At present, relatively few national DEBRAs consider "foreign" applications. Applications that are recommended for funding are reported first to national groups who either referred the application to DEBRA International, or represent the host country where the research will be carried out, with an invitation to participate in funding, if they so wish. The group is under no obligation to do so but it can either fund the project in full, in which case it becomes responsible for the management of the grant, or in part by making a contribution towards the costs. If the national group is unable to fund the project in full or at all, other groups who have indicated an interest in supporting research are invited to fund the research, in full or in part.
3. Details of projects that have been funded following Panel assessment are listed on the DEBRA International website.

## 8. For the future

1. There is currently no central, international pot of research funding because nearly all money devoted to DEBRA funded research is raised on a national basis. Pooling of funds within DEBRA International has not been considered to be viable to date for political and financial reasons but this is kept under review.
2. Advice given from many different sources suggests that the best chance of progress lies in the concentration of the most innovative work on a limited number of specialist EB research groups who have the critical mass and facilities to undertake leading edge work.
3. As the prospect of taking research advances into the clinic comes closer, it will become increasingly important for DEBRA to develop its strategy to facilitate this process. It is envisaged that a Translational Research Advisory Panel (TRAP) will be created to advise on priorities and routes for clinical development.

4. TRAP membership will be drawn from the EB research and clinical communities, and from other groups with appropriate translational research and development expertise, including industry, regulatory affairs, healthcare providers and funders, for example.
5. Task forces, with a lifetime dictated by need, will be set up by TRAP with membership providing the expertise to address specific issues, such as priorities for developing clinical trials, or IP and industry liaison. The Task Forces will report to TRAP, via the DEBRA International Research Manager, and be disbanded when their work is completed.
6. There will be close interaction between TRAP and MSAP to ensure awareness of recommendations on strategic priorities for research. However, this group will be separate from the MSAP, with a distinct remit, and will play no part in the evaluation of individual research grant applications.