Call for seed funding proposals:

The ageing immune system

Guidelines for applicants 2021

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

In November last year, we published our priorities for the next five years in our strategic framework. This sees us take a thematic approach to funding in, what we hope will be, a more focused approach to supporting under-funded areas, as well as being clearer to prospective applicants as to what we are looking to fund.

The ageing immune system was identified by the British Society for Research on Ageing as an underfunded area of great importance as it underpins a number of conditions. In addition, a recently published House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee report on "Ageing: Science, Technology and Healthy Living" also highlighted that "*one area which has received less attention is how the immune system changes with age*".[1]

1.2 THE OPPORTUNITY

We plan to allocate £600,000 to a call for seed funding proposals, from which we expect to make c.12 awards, although more funding may be made available if we receive applications of suitably high quality. We are expecting awards to be a maximum of £50,000.

Why a call for seed funding? Our Research Grants Committee had noted that some applications for funding fell short because they were lacking a vital piece of supporting evidence or data. It was acknowledged that seed funding could provide the opportunity for such evidence-gathering experiments to be conducted. Applications for funding should therefore demonstrate how the planned work acts as a stepping stone to the development of a larger project/funding application (either to us to another funder).

Accordingly, we plan to allocate a much more substantial sum of money in financial year 2023/24 to support Research Project Grant applications on this theme, to which successful seed funding applicants will have the opportunity to apply for follow-on funding.

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[1] Science and Technology Committee, Ageing: Science, Technology and Healthy Living (HL 2019–21, 183) paras 120-126: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4286/documents/43456/default/

2. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

2.1 WHO CAN APPLY?

Principal Investigators (lead applicants) must be based at a UK university or other eligible research organisation. First-time Principal Investigators are encouraged to apply, but we would expect to see clearly planned and appropriate mentoring and support from experienced co-applicants. However, please note that we will only accept one application per lead applicant.

We welcome seed funding proposals with co-applicants and collaborators. In addition, we welcome multidisciplinary teams (where appropriate). Contributions from international collaborators may be permitted where clearly justified.

2.2 RESEARCH THEME

The overall theme for this seed funding call is **the ageing immune system**. Examples of specific areas encompassed in this theme and in which we are interested include:

- How age-related change impacts infection and vaccination
  As we have seen during the pandemic, older adults are more susceptible to infection and related complications and, while vaccination is important, its efficacy and effectiveness decline with age. Further understanding of how the ageing immune system results in this increased susceptibility is important to improving healthy life span.
- Ageing and inflammation ("inflammaging")
  While there is a better understanding of "inflammaging" now, there are aspects which still need to be explored. These include its influence on adaptive immune responses (e.g. vaccine-induced protective immunity, T-cell differentiation and susceptibility to problems following respiratory infections such as COVID-19 and 'flu, or its effects on physiological processes which are not typically considered to be immunological but are known to be affected by the immune system such as myocarditis, kidney or vascular disease).
- Mechanistic causes of age-related changes in the immune response (both innate and adaptive immunity).
- Immune cell senescence
  There have been encouraging studies which support the geroscience hypothesis which states that most, if not all, age-related chronic diseases can be alleviated by interventions that retard the aging process and/or senescence: the exact role of senescence and "senescence-associated secretory phenotype" (SASP) are still important areas for investigation.
- Strategies to overcome age-related changes in immunity
  There are some approaches which are already in use or undergoing testing but continued research to discover other approaches is still needed.

2.3   AWARD TYPE

These awards offer the opportunity for researchers to develop novel ideas and generate supporting data that will enable them to catalyse further research.

This scheme is **not** intended to provide:

- Bridging support
- Funds for the completion or extension of an existing project
- Funding for stand-alone Master's or PhD projects
- Funding for research that is entirely focused on understanding the mechanisms of or treatments for COVID-19 (with the exception of the research areas described in the Section 2.2)

Flexibility will be a key part of this scheme, **but it is expected that seed funding would support research expenses and/or salary or stipend support for a defined piece of work with a realistic goal/plan for how this links to a future, larger project**. We particularly encourage early career post-doctoral researchers/first time Principal Investigators (PIs) to apply. These projects may also be suitable for well-supervised Master's level research students and/or PhD students who have recently completed their studies to participate in.

The indicative duration and costs for a seed funding proposal are as follows:

- Six months to one year
- Up to a maximum of £50,000

We acknowledge that this amount of funding may not be sufficient for some applicants, and therefore encourage applications that can be part-funded by the host institution either financially[2] or in-kind through the provision of services and facilities.

2.4   ELIGIBLE COSTS

You will be expected to provide detailed budgetary information on the total costs of the work, phased quarterly. Further information on completing your budget within the application is provided in our "how to" guide for using the grants management portal.

Please do not include any part or in-kind contributions from other sources in your budget table (you will be given the opportunity to detail these, if applicable, in a separate question).

The following list outlines the relevant budget table headings and information on what you can and cannot apply for:

STAFF COSTS

- Basic salary
  - Broadly, we will not cover the salary costs of PIs who are already tenured, although we may consider buying out teaching time up to a maximum of one day per week for first-time PIs who are tenured, but the host institution must demonstrate that this is how the funds will be used.

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[2] This may be from internal university funds and/or funding from industry.

- We will meet directly incurred salary costs (e.g. the salary costs of research assistants and other staff employed on the grant).
- If you are a first-time Principal Investigator applying without tenure at your host institution, then you **may** be eligible to claim your salary. If this is the case, a letter of support from your university/research organisation will be required to confirm that they agree to extend your contract to cover the duration of the grant if you are successful.
- Please note that we will **not** contribute towards the Apprenticeship levy as this forms part of central overhead (see below re. overhead costs).
- When completing the budget table, please provide as much detail as possible **and provide a breakdown of salary costs per staff post,** where appropriate (please don't provide a single figure for 'Basic salary' for all posts combined as this makes it difficult to review your budget).
- National insurance and pension, once again per staff post and not aggregated
- Local allowance, once again per staff post and not aggregated

    - This includes London weighting, or other location allowances.

- Staff recruitment

    - We will pay a maximum of £500 towards the recruitment of staff being supported by the grant.
- Career development / support costs
    - Career development / support costs will be met when there is clearly defined explanation of how they will contribute to capacity building/career-development in age-related fields during and beyond the lifetime of the proposed research. Examples of career development costs include mentoring and training. We would also expect these costs to relate to the answers provided in the relevant sections of the application form.

RUNNING EXPENSES

- Animal costs (if any)
    - This can include the costs of attaining appropriate licences.
- Consumables and other project specific running costs
    - The cost of materials and consumables required to carry out the proposed research will be met but should be justified, with special regard to those categories of overhead costs which the Trust will not meet. Estimated figures for consumables/materials are not acceptable and must be itemised.
- Data storage / archive
    - Data storage, archiving and management costs may be met, on condition that they are reasonable and proportionate in the context of the study.
- Participant costs / expenses / incentives
- Steering group / meeting costs
- Travel and subsistence
    - Travel and subsistence costs for Principal Investigators (lead applicants), Co-Investigators (co-applicants) and staff assigned to the study, where required by the nature of the work, will normally be met and should be based on the most suitable and economical form of travel.

EQUIPMENT (INCLUDING COMPUTER COSTS)

- Requests for study-specific items of equipment costing up to £10,000 may be met but should be fully justified, particularly as this would form a very large proportion of the overall sum available under this initiative (the purpose of which is not intended to be for the purchase of capital equipment).
- We would normally expect the involved organisations to provide access to major equipment, but where specific circumstances require substantial usage and either the purchase of a major item of equipment specifically for the study, or a contribution to the use of major equipment is requested, a detailed case should be provided, with the University contributing at least 50% of the costs.
- Computers and other IT equipment dedicated to the study may be met, on condition that full justification is provided and items are under £1,000.

OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

- Impact-related costs
  - We will meet costs for members of the team to attend conferences as a speaker and/or to present posters etc. to disseminate the findings of the grant.
  - Costs for other dissemination and impact-related activities related to the research may be applied for, provided that full justification is given. We would also expect these costs to relate to the answers provided in the relevant sections of the application form.
  - We will not meet costs for attending an academic conference as a delegate only.
- Open access / open data costs
  - These may be included in applications but should be fully justified and comply with the Trust's [Open Access Policy](#).

GUIDANCE ON OVERHEAD COSTS

Apart from any specific cases listed above, we will not meet overhead costs (typically those identified by Research Councils as Directly Allocated Costs, Indirect Costs and Estates Costs) for research institutions.

Please also note that host universities receive a contribution to overheads via the [Charities Research Support Fund.](#) More information regarding the [Charities element of the Quality-Related ("QR") funding](#) can be found in the 'What costs will you cover?' question in our Funding FAQs on the ['Apply for funding' page](#) on our website.

3. APPLICATION PROCESS AND TIMELINE

The application process will consist of one stage and will follow the timetable below:

Activity	Date
Seed funding call open	7th June 2021
Deadline for seed funding applications	23rd July 2021 (5pm)
Peer review of applications	July – September 2021
Seed funding applications considered by the Research Grants Committee and expert independent panellists	12th October 2021
Applicants notified of the outcome	Late October/Early November 2021

4. SEED FUNDING APPLICATIONS

4.1 OVERVIEW

Please ensure that you have completed our eligibility questionnaire and read our funding FAQs, both of which can be found on the "Apply for funding" page of our website. You should also read our Terms and Conditions.

You should also be aware that we require all lead applicants to provide an ORCID iD when completing an application form. Any prospective lead applicants without an ORCID iD can register for one. We use the information included in the ORCID profile to help auto-populate the "About you" section in the application form. Please follow this link for help with your ORCID profile and guidance on how to register for one, for those that don't already have one.

The seed funding application form needs to be submitted via our online Grants Management Portal. You can download a draft PDF version of the full form from our website. External participants can be invited to contribute to the application form on the Grants Management Portal. Please see the table below for more information on who can/needs to be involved with the application process.

Required	Optional
Administrative/Finance Manager: An appropriate Administrative/Finance Manager **must** be invited to complete a declaration on behalf of the lead applicant's institution (the lead institution). This individual may also contribute to the financial details section of the form, if required. **Head of Department:** The lead applicant **must** invite their Head of Department to complete a declaration on behalf of their department. **Please note:** the application cannot be submitted until all required external participants have completed their contributions.	**Co-applicant(s):** The lead applicant may, if they wish, invite co-applicants to review and contribute to the form. **Please note:** Once any optional co-applicants have been invited, it will not be possible to submit the form until they have completed their contribution or if you have indicated on the portal that they are no longer required to contribute.

Detailed information on inviting external participants is provided in our "how to" guide for using the Grants Management Portal.

4.2   ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Once submitted, the Trust will conduct an administrative review of the application to confirm that it meets the following criteria:

- Satisfactory completion of the application form
- Eligibility for the scheme
- The research proposal being within remit

Seed funding application forms will then go through external peer review and will be assessed by a panel comprising independent experts alongside members of our Research Grants Committee.

Seed funding applications will be assessed by the peer and Committee reviewers on the following criteria:

- ➢ Merit and novelty of the research proposal
- ➢ Methodology and feasibility of the research plan
- ➢ Realistic goals and plans for next steps
- ➢ Suitability of the proposed lead applicant and team
- ➢ Suitability of the research environment
- ➢ Justification of requested resources and value for money

The expert panel will meet to consider applications on 12th October 2021, following which applicants will be notified of the outcome of their applications in late October/early November.

FEEDBACK ON YOUR APPLICATION

Both successful and unsuccessful applicants will receive feedback from the independent expert panellists. We will also be providing information on the eventual success rate for the call at a later date.

4.3 CHECKLIST

Make sure you have completed all the relevent tasks on this list before submitting your application:

- ☐ Have any invited co-applicants read and understood the various guidelines to ensure that the application can be submitted by the deadline on the Grants Management Portal?

- ☐ Have you attached a letter of support from your Head of Department (and also attached any other requested letters of support)?

- ☐ Have you provided detailed and relevant answers to all of the questions in the application form?

- ☐ Has an Administrative/Finance Manager from the lead organisation read the application and completed their declaration to ensure that the application can be submitted before the deadline on the Grants Management Portal?

- ☐ Has the lead applicant's Head of Department read the application and completed their declaration to ensure that the application can be submitted by the deadline on the Grants Management Portal?

5. SUPPORT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

5.1 SUPPORT DOCUMENTS

- Visit our "Apply for funding" page to see our general funding FAQ's, including what our Research Grants Committee would say a good application looks like.

- Read our Terms and conditions for research grants.

- Read our Open Access Policy

- Read our Intellectual property policy (if relevant)

- Read our Funders Action Plan for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

- For guidance on navigating and using the Grants Management Portal, please see our "how to" guide

- For the template application form please follow this link

5.2 EXTERNAL GUIDANCE

- Applications that include NHS resources will need to adhere to the Department of Health AcoRD guidance. Follow this link to view the AcoRD FAQ's.

- For applications that consists of clinical research, you might consider visiting the Clinical Research Network portfolio for help and support.

- For more information on including underserved groups in research, you might be interested in a website hosted by the INCLUDE initiative from the National Institute for Health Research, which provides guidance for ensuring health research is inclusive, as well as instructions on how to register for a free online course run by INCLUDE.

- Feel free to read about "Secrets on writing a winning grant" in the academic journal Nature

5.3 CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any queries regarding the call, including if you need any alternative accessible formats at any stage of the application process, please contact grants@dunhillmedical.org.uk. We will do our very best to assist you.