

naturejobs

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What's the fairest way to allot precious government funds to promising biomedical scientists? In an initiative developed by its outgoing director Elias Zerhouni, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has decided that ensuring a minimum level of support for new investigators should be part of an equitable formula — one that benefits both the investigator and the scientific enterprise.

In late October, the NIH made official a policy that has been under review for the past two years. It aims to ensure that grant applicants who have never received NIH funding should have success rates comparable to those who have received NIH funds at least once. The agency will achieve this by routinely funnelling the applications of new investigators into a separate pool initially so that they are not competing with more experienced NIH grantees. For the fiscal year 2009, this translates into at least 1,650 awards to new investigators across the NIH's centres.

The move is meant to reduce reviewer bias against first-time applicants, a documented trend that, unsurprisingly, sees existing and previous NIH grantees — who have demonstrated success and can provide more data to buttress their proposals — typically faring better.

But Zerhouni's move was not inevitable, obvious or risk-free. With this additional attention towards first-timers, grantees with more experience — or, indeed, with just a single NIH grant — have slightly diminished chances. Is Zerhouni unfairly gaming the system? And will the quality of the science suffer as a result? It is possible, in principle. But with the average age of the new NIH grantee on the rise — up to 42 from 37 in 1980 — Zerhouni has recognized that exceptional young biomedical scientists must have a reasonable chance to succeed, and that new ideas and approaches are essential for a healthy research enterprise. At the very least, the policy sends a signal to eager but discouraged young scientists — part of its goal, says the NIH's deputy director of extramural research, Sally Rockey. "It's a way for them to understand that the NIH is possible."

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