

Tough love

A British research council's 'blacklisting' rule is a radical, unpopular but courageous effort to address a crisis in the peer-review system.

Starting in April, a British research funding body will undertake an experiment that deserves close attention from funding agencies around the world. In an effort to relieve growing pressure on its grant application system, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) will be picking out scientists who repeatedly send in grant applications that fail to secure funding, and restricting them to just one bid in the next year (see page 474).

This 'blacklisting' rule is risky and contentious, but is nonetheless an idea worth trying — and, perhaps, emulating. The odds of winning a grant are plunging at funding agencies around the world. These low success rates lead researchers to submit more applications in the hope of securing at least some funding, overburdening peer reviewers. The system ends up rewarding safe, short-term research proposals that meet everyone's approval, at the cost of the innovative suggestions it should be supporting.

The EPSRC's chief executive, David Delpy, has been trying to get scientists funded by his agency to set their sights on more ambitious, long-term efforts ever since he took up his post in September 2007. But just asking the community to send in fewer, larger proposals has not worked. Hence the new policy, which represents a last-ditch effort to boost success rates.

The EPSRC should be applauded for its courage in attempting to impose a tough, unpopular rule, which seems to have grown out of a genuine desire to benefit British science. But the council deserves no approbation for its communication. It could hardly have introduced its plan in a more ham-fisted way. Last year, after insufficient consultation, the EPSRC announced that it wanted to ban blacklisted researchers, and to start immediately — leaving no time for scientists to change their application behaviour (see *Nature* 458, 391; 2009). Only a storm of justified protest caused the agency to delay and soften its policy.

The consequences of the revised policy are uncertain. Thanks to other peer-review changes, applications have already been cut by about a third since last year, and success rates are up. But the new policy's threat of exclusion may further discourage adventurous funding

bids. The EPSRC also runs the risk of alienating its community, making it harder to find peer reviewers — who are in increasingly scarce supply.

The agency has already received plenty of complaints about the rule, many of which could point out useful directions for fine-tuning. Younger scientists, in particular, worry about the stigma on their career of being singled out for exclusion — a possibility that adds a heavy responsibility to referees, who have to worry that their judgments might be perceived as personal black marks. The EPSRC should consider giving younger scientists some kind of special dispensation, especially considering that the council currently counts every failed application on its list, even those for highly competitive student fellowships, and for outreach projects.

Other scientists have worried that an application is marked 'unsuccessful' if it falls below the halfway point on a list of proposals ranked by panels of peer reviewers — a criterion that not only seems arbitrary, but also risks taking out good researchers who are simply unlucky. Under existing rules, review panels already have to indicate whether they think a proposal is 'not deserving of funding', so why not use that as the cut-off mark?

With research budgets under ever-increasing pressure, tough restrictions will be needed to boost success rates. No other funding agency has dared to attempt some of the bold alternative policies that deserve a trial, such as a blanket restriction on application numbers. Instead, they are waiting to see how the EPSRC's policy turns out — or, as in Japan, just doling out smaller amounts of money for each application in the hopes of funding more researchers. However, Japan's strategy may end up rewarding short-term, unambitious research bids, the opposite of what the EPSRC seeks to do. The EPSRC is leading the way with a gutsy gamble: the very type of project it wants its researchers to pursue. ■

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Buyer beware

Lack of US regulation is allowing dubious dietary supplements to be sold as life-enhancing elixirs.

The special section on ageing research in this week's issue comes at a particularly exciting time for the field. Ageing may be inexorable — a steady accumulation of cellular damage that cannot be stopped — but it is increasingly seen as a process that can, at least in part, be regulated (see page 504).

Unfortunately, legitimate research advances in the field can

sometimes give an unwanted boost to the charlatans pitching anti-ageing elixirs (see page 491).

A case in point is resveratrol, a compound found in grape skins and red wine. About a decade ago, researchers found that this compound seemed both to extend lifespan in some animals and to have health benefits in mice. The news media immediately leapt on the story — as did the pharmaceutical industry: Sirtris, a firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that was founded to develop resveratrol-like compounds in 2004, was sold in 2008 to London-based pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline for \$720 million.

Since then, resveratrol's possible role in ageing has turned out to be more complex than it first seemed (see pages 480 and 513), and there