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An unhealthy obsession

The energy expended by US biomedical scientists on complaining about grant-application limits would be better directed at the real problem: stagnant funding.

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced last week that it plans to hold firm on an unpopular three-year-old policy limiting grant applicants to one resubmission if a proposal is rejected the first time. The world's largest biomedical research funder is pushing back against a powerful current of unhappiness among its grant recipients. Last year, more than 2,300 of them signed a letter to the US\$31-billion agency condemning the policy as irrational and damaging in an era of historically low grant-application success rates. The 'two strikes and you're out' rule, the letter-writers argued correctly, makes it more likely that some highly meritorious applications will fail to win funding. The policy is particularly hard on the youngest scientists, who suffer both from a dearth of grant-writing experience and the lack of a large body of work to build on in crafting a new proposal. Senior scientists with narrowly focused research programmes are also hurt, as they may have trouble developing a "substantially" different proposal after they have failed twice, as the NIH requires.

But the fact that the critics are correct is beside the point. Other countries have already instituted much more draconian schemes. In the United Kingdom, for instance, applicants to the Medical Research Council who have failed to win funding on their first bid must wait a year before even trying a second time. In the case of the NIH, the bottom line is that, even if the agency were to reintroduce a rule allowing third submissions of twice-failed grants, the same absolute number of applicants would end up getting funded. Indeed, some excellent applications would probably fail to pass muster under any submission regime, as the Comment on page 34 makes clear. With application success rates at historic lows largely because the number of applicants is at historic highs, many first-rate proposals would still go begging.

The crucial problem is not that applicants are limited to two tries; it is that too many aspiring applicants are chasing a stagnant pool of funds that is, in real terms, being eroded further by inflation each year. The latest figures from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the NIH's second-largest institute, highlight the problem. It is currently funding 6% of the applications for mainstay 'R01' grants that it receives from established scientists, and 10% of those from early-career investigators.

Yet the two-versus-three-chances issue continues to generate heat in the community. One online discussion, at the DrugMonkey blog, generated more than 46 comments totalling some 5,000 words in less than one week in October, after *Nature's* News blog noted that the NIH was considering returning to the three-strikes system.

All the time and energy that these and other angst-ridden scientists are devoting to complaints about how a finite pie is being sliced would be far better directed at trying to enlarge it. Only a bigger funding pie — or a dramatic exodus of aspiring grant-winners from the ranks of US biomedical science, surely a less desirable outcome — will give grant applicants a decent chance of winning funding.

Before US readers roll their eyes at the suggestion that lobbying

for more money could succeed in a dire fiscal climate, they might cast those eyes northwards to Canada, where, last summer, some 2,000 white-coated scientists and graduate students marched on the parliament in Ottawa to protest at what they described as anti-science policies and funding cuts being enacted by the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper. The photogenic Parliament Hill protest generated around 40 items of news coverage — no mean feat

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in a country with one-tenth the population of the United States. The march clearly got the Harper government's attention: the same day, Gary Goodyear, the minister for science and technology, issued an animated defence of his government's record on science.

But with few exceptions, US scientists, like scientists everywhere, have been loath to take to the streets with placards — to be visibly, outspokenly political in defence of their own best interests. Clearly, in the current US context, that strategy, or lack of one, is failing. And things could get much worse. The across-the-board cuts that will take effect in early January if Congress and the White House fail to agree on a deficit-reduction plan would slice 8% from the NIH's budget, making the current situation look comparatively comfortable. That threat should be enough to galvanize researchers into action.

One thing is certain. If each signatory of last year's letter blasting the NIH were to recruit four colleagues, and if all donned white coats in a coordinated march on Capitol Hill, the media would take notice. The sight of 12,000 biomedical scientists alarmed about the present and future of their enterprise would capture politicians' attention in a way that no number of letters and e-mails from advocacy groups will ever do. Such a dramatic call to action may seem — well — dramatic, but if it is not warranted now, then when? ■

Suspend disbelief

Wrangling over scientific misconduct could influence Romania's general election.

One of Romania's best known cultural figures is playwright Eugène Ionesco, who co-founded the twentieth-century movement known as the theatre of the absurd. Had he been alive today, he might have written an absurdist play about his native country — with science taking a strong supporting role.

Romania remains one of the problem children in the European Union (EU). It has stacked up debilitating debt in the past decade,