



Michael Smith Foundation for
Health Research

Infrastructure Programs Review Process

Rigorous review processes are a cornerstone of MSFHR's operations and help to ensure that MSFHR is accountable to the government of the province of British Columbia for the money it invests in health research. The vast majority of MSFHR's review processes are associated with assessing funding applications and making funding recommendations. MSFHR also periodically convenes review panels to assess its programs and/or processes, and make recommendations for improvement. Most of MSFHR's review processes are managed by Programs staff.

1. Roles and Responsibilities

MSFHR Program Teams, in consultation with the MSFHR Research Advisory Council (RAC), are responsible for managing and coordinating all aspects of the review process, including the appointment of the Chair, the Scientific Officer (if required), and the Reviewers who comprise the Review Panel.

The **Program Team** consists of various employees of MSFHR who coordinate, support, monitor and manage the funding programs. The members of the Program Team support all members of the Review Panel by conducting reviews in accordance with MSFHR guidelines.

The **Chair** ensures the efficient, objective and fair review of all applications, and the overall operation and conduct of the review meeting. The Chair usually has some familiarity and previous experience with MSFHR (for example, as a prior Review Panel member).

The **Scientific Officer's** primary function is to summarize the key points of discussion during the review meeting. The need for a Scientific Officer is assessed by MSFHR in conjunction with the Panel Chair and the RAC.

The **Reviewers'** primary function is the impartial and objective review and rating of applications for funding. MSFHR's Review Panels comprise two or more independent Reviewers.

2. Selection of the Review Panel

The process of selecting a Chair for the Review Panel starts approximately 8-10 weeks prior to the application deadline, while the search for potential Reviewers starts approximately 6-8 weeks prior.

The Chair is appointed by MSFHR's Program Team in consultation with the RAC, and generally has had previous experience working with the MSFHR as part of a Review Panel or other committee, as well as chairing review meetings for other agencies.

Selection of a Scientific Officer, if required, is done in consultation with the Chair and the RAC; preference is given to persons who have had prior experience working in a similar role on other panels.

Potential Reviewers are identified through a variety of sources including lists of prior Reviewers, recommendations from MSFHR staff and/or Applicants, and from environmental scans of investigators specializing in specific research areas applicable to the funding program or applications.

MSFHR strives to maintain a diverse representation within the Review Panel. The goal is to achieve an equitable distribution of qualified reviewers in terms of gender, geographical location, and research interests. Special attention is also given to the distribution of Reviewers across the four CIHR research pillars (Biomedical, Clinical, Health Systems and Services, and Population Health).

3. Confidentiality and Privacy

All information contained in applications submitted to MSFHR, reports made by Reviewers, and any discussions by the Review Panel about MSFHR's funding programs or applications/applicants, are strictly confidential and subject to the BC Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA). All Panel Members are required to read and sign an [MSFHR Confidentiality and Non-disclosure Agreement](#) prior to commencing the review.

By law, Applicants have access to their own application files, therefore written documents regarding the evaluation of an application are made available to the Applicants when they are notified of MSFHR's decision. The identities of the Reviewers are not revealed.

4. Conflict of Interest

In order to guarantee the integrity of the review process, MSFHR ensures that the ratings and rankings of applications or proposals are fair and objective. As such, all MSFHR reviewers are required to observe the [MSFHR Policy on Conflict of Interest](#) (PDF) and [Guidelines on Conflict of Interest](#) (PDF). No member of the Review Panel may participate in, or witness the review of, an application where s/he may be in a real or perceived conflict of interest.

5. Prior to the Review Meeting

After the funding application deadline, all selected Reviewers rank their level of knowledge and expertise against each of the funding applications that meets the eligibility criteria for the competition. Reviewers may rank their level of expertise as either: Expert, Intermediate Knowledge, No Knowledge, or declare a Conflict of Interest. Based upon this self-assignment, the Program Team will assign a Primary and Secondary Reviewer to each application. The Program Team may identify the need for additional reviewers at this time and recruit accordingly.

Prior to the review meeting, the Primary and Secondary Reviewers for each application will independently complete a thorough review, preparing written comments and an initial score for each application. At the same time, all Reviewers are responsible for familiarizing themselves with all of the applications and being prepared to discuss them at the review meeting.

Applications are rated according to established criteria for the individual award program and using the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) scoring scale (see "Scoring" below).

6. The Review Meeting

Before the review of an application commences, any Reviewer who has declared a Conflict of Interest with that application will be asked to leave the room for the duration of the panel's discussion of that application.

The Primary and Secondary Reviewers will summarize the application's major strengths and weaknesses with their initial scores displayed to the panel. The Chair will then lead the panel's discussion, inviting participation from all members. The Primary and Secondary Reviewers will be given an opportunity to revise their initial scores based on the Panel's discussion. The Chair will ask the Primary and Secondary Reviewers to agree upon a consensus score, which may or may not be equal to the average of their two initial scores. All Reviewers, including the Primary and Secondary Reviewers, will then confidentially score each application within +/- 0.5 of the consensus score. The Chair and the Scientific Officer generally do not score the applications. The final rating assigned to an application is the average of the confidential scores of all Reviewers.

The overall rankings of applications against each other will not be made known until the end of the review meeting.

Once the review of all applications is complete, the Program Team will produce a list of the applications in ranked order. A ranked list, with the identity of the Applicant masked, is presented to the Review Panel for a final review.

7. Scoring

The purpose of scoring the application is to assign a rating based on merit, and to establish a ranked list of applicants in order to make funding recommendations.

To ensure consistency, Reviewers use a common scale and apply the same convention in assigning ratings. MSFHR generally uses the scale developed by CIHR, ranging from 0 – 4.9, although the descriptor terms are frequently modified to better fit the nature of the competitions. Reviewers are encouraged to use the full range of scores.

As a guide, an application of average strength relative to other applications should receive a score of 3.0. If the overall score from both the Primary and Secondary Reviewers is below 3.0, little or no discussion is required by the full Panel, unless a Reviewer specifically requests discussion.

8. Funding Decisions

Applicants are notified of the outcome of the review process within three months of the competition deadline. The number of applications funded may vary from one competition to another, and depends on the quality of the applications received and the available program funds. There is no appeal process.

Funded and non-funded applicants receive a letter detailing the funding decision, the score and ranking of their application, and reviewer comments. A list of the funded applicants is published on the MSFHR website.

9. Continuous Process Improvement

MSFHR is committed to continual improvement in the process of reviewing MSFHR programs and/or applications for funding. After a review meeting Panel Members are asked to provide comments and feedback to MSFHR. On a regular basis the MSFHR Peer Review Oversight Committee (PROC) also provides advice and makes recommendations to the MSFHR Research Advisory Council (RAC) on policies and procedures pertaining to the monitoring, co-ordination and evaluation of the review processes of MSFHR's competitions.