

## An Antidote for Groupthink— A Qualified Lottery for Research Dollars

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AS A FOLLOW-UP TO OUR EDITORIAL, “Who Gets Funding? Let the People Decide,”<sup>1</sup> in which we proposed that government hold contests that let the people decide which projects are funded, we would like to propose a seven-step approach with timetable to show how quickly that idea could become reality. For the purposes of illustration, let us assume our pilot program would be a U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) small business innovation research (SBIR) grant to create a new pain management medical device.

*Step 1. Authorization (done).* The SBIR program has been reauthorized by the U.S. Congress through FY2017. For FY2012, 2.6% of NIDA’s budget is to be directed to the SBIR program. We propose that just 1% of the total amount set aside for small business be directed to the qualified grant lottery in its first year.

*Step 2. Appropriations (done).* NIDA received \$1.053 billion in appropriations for FY2012. Applying the above formula, this would yield about \$275,000 for the first year of the qualified grant lottery.

*Step 3. Regulations and application form (30-day notice, subset of current rules and application form).* To ensure the safety of humans and animals used in the research, there would need to be a few basic rules relating to their protection. These could be easily adapted from current rules by stripping away all but the most essential protections, so as not to be burdensome to the most innovative inventors.

We also propose that there be a limited set of qualifications to ensure that the individual or group that wins the SBIR grant would be able to execute the tasks proposed to achieve the desired outcome. It would disappoint the taxpaying public to generate excitement about the grant lottery and fund an innovative idea, only to discover that the inventor hadn’t a clue as to how to bring his or her idea to fruition.

Streamlining the standard Adobe application package would go a long way to attracting mavericks. The new package could eliminate all but the essential language that says that if funded the inventor will follow all applicable rules in executing the proposed project while safeguarding human and animal subjects. The streamlined form could ask for a total budget number, an abstract, a .jpg diagram of the proposed device, and a short narrative. We believe that a three-page limit to the narrative would be short enough to attract the innovators yet long enough for the inventor to be able to tell a compelling story.

*Step 4. Publication (30-day notice).* In addition to the usual methods of publishing the grant’s availability on grants.gov and via the *Federal Register* and the NIH and NIDA Web sites,

we suggest that the application link be tweeted and otherwise posted via social media Web sites. This would attract a broader group of individuals with fundable ideas.

*Step 5. Qualification (automated).* Grants.gov and eRA Commons automate validations to ensure that required application fields have been completed. Building on this model, an algorithm could be developed to ensure that those grant applications that form the pool for random selection include action-word keywords that indicate ability to execute successfully.

*Step 6. Drawing and speed pass (3 days).* The qualification step above would serve as the “first pass” selection, from which a random 6–10 applications would be chosen. These applications would be given a speed read by a three-person independent panel—a clinician, an engineer, and a pain management patient—whose sole purpose would be to answer the question of whether this idea, no matter how contrarian, has even a small chance of succeeding. If the answer is yes, then the .jpg drawing of the proposed device with the abstract of the application would be posted for voting.

*Step 7. Voting (7 days).* Anyone could vote via Facebook, Twitter, or other social media Web sites on which one of the 6–10 ideas should receive the \$275,000 in Phase I funding. Inventors could ask their friends to vote for them, but only one vote per e-mail address would be allowed, and the idea with the most votes would win. As the person voted, NIDA could ask permission to use the person’s e-mail address to send updates on the progress of this and other innovative pain management projects.

Upon award, grant implementation would proceed as per the usual timetable, with 6 months to produce Phase I results. If the Phase I feasibility study would prove the project is feasible, NIDA could make Phase II SBIR funds available on application, up to the currently available funding limits (usually less than \$1 million). Further, if warranted by Phase II results, competing continuation funds could be made available to bring the product up to FDA standards.

What do you think about this proposal to get government funds into the hands of nontraditional researchers in less than 90 days? Let us know at [cyberpsych@vrphobia.com](mailto:cyberpsych@vrphobia.com).

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### Reference

1. Wiederhold B. Who gets funding? Let the people decide. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 2011; 14:409–10.