MUTIPLE SCLEROSIS SOCIETY OF CANADA

CLINICAL AND POPULATION HEALTH PILOT GRANT PROGRAM GUIDE

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1. BACKGROUND AND GRANT DESCRIPTION

1.1. WHAT IS THE MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS SOCIETY OF CANADA?

Established in 1948, the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada (MSSC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing services to people with multiple sclerosis (MS) and their families and funding the highest-quality research to find the cause and cure for this disease. The MSSC is empowered to make grants of money for use by individuals within lawfully established agencies or institutions to further its mission.

The Mission of the MSSC is: “To be a leader in finding a cure for multiple sclerosis and enabling people affected by MS to enhance their quality of life.”

1.2. WHAT IS A CLINICAL AND POPULATION HEALTH PILOT GRANT?

The pilot grant program awards seed funding that allows researchers to develop and test new and innovative research questions and pursue pioneering approaches that have the potential to impact the MS field in topics related to Clinical and Population Health (CPH). Objectives of the pilot grant program are to enable researchers to test novel and high-potential MS research ideas, collect key preliminary data to support further research, test the feasibility of a study design, concept, or intervention on a small scale, and to provide researchers a trajectory to larger grant competitions. Projects that are extensions of ongoing research that have ample supporting data will not be considered.

Currently, only pilot grants related to topics that fall under the CPH domain are being accepted to this competition. These include epidemiology, health economics, risk factors, health care delivery/policy, treatment monitoring and health assessment, symptom management, rehabilitation and social aspects of MS.

1.3. ADMINISTRATION OF THE PILOT GRANT

The administration of the pilot grant program is the responsibility and function of the MSSC’S Research Department at the National Office.

2. COMPETITION AND GRANT INFORMATION

2.1. MSSC COMPETITION SCHEDULE

The pilot grant competition is launched as part of the annual research and awards competition that also includes operating grants and endMS personnel awards. The annual research grants and awards competition launches annually in July and closes on October 1st at 4:00 p.m. ET. In the event the deadline falls on a weekend, the deadline is the following Monday. For full
details about the pilot grant, visit the MS Society website.

2.2. ELIGIBILITY

Principal Investigator (PI): The PI is listed as the primary applicant/contact and is responsible for overseeing the research conducted as part of the proposal. The PI must be considered eligible by his or her institution to apply for a research grant. The PI need not be a Canadian citizen but must be conducting research in a Canadian institution which is recognized by the Tri-Council Agencies, made up of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The PI should be autonomous regarding their research activities, has a faculty appointment that allows them to pursue the proposed research, and is equipped to supervise trainees and publish research activities. The MSSC encourages both junior and senior investigators who are new to the MS field or are pursuing a new line of inquiry in MS to apply, however the competition is open to all eligible PIs. There can be only 1 (one) PI per grant application who will assume scientific and administrative oversight for the study.

Co-Principal Investigator (Co-PI): The Co-PI is as an individual who shares responsibility for the direction of the proposed research project with the PI and meets the eligibility criteria of a PI. There are no restrictions as to the number of Co-Principal Investigators per application.

Institution: Institutions are the official recipients of grants made for the support of specific research by the PI. MSSC only accepts applications from Canadian post-secondary institutions and their affiliated institutions including hospitals and research institutes.

Concurrent Grant Submissions: The PI may concurrently submit a maximum of one (1) new pilot grant application and two (2) operating grant applications (one new operating grant and one renewal operating grant) per competition. The PI can hold a maximum of two operating grants and one pilot grant at any one time. Data and outcomes that will be derived from the pilot grant should not overlap with those from an operating grant, but the topics can be related.

2.3. TERM AND FUNDING

Term: The MSSC supports pilot grants for terms up to two (2) years. Pilot grants are non-renewable.

Amount: The amount that may be requested for pilot grants is approximately $50,000 over the term of the grant.

2.4. RENEWAL AND RESUBMISSION

Renewals: Pilot grants are non-renewable. Grants submitted to the operating grant
competition that build on preliminary data obtained from a pilot grant are considered new operating grant submissions.

**Resubmissions** Applications that were unsuccessful in their previous submission to the MSSC pilot grant competition are considered resubmissions. Resubmitting an application is permitted under MSSC competition rules. An application is considered to be a resubmission if the overall research plan (hypothesis and aims) are similar to what was outlined in the first submission. The MSSC may choose to reclassify a new application as a resubmission should they it be very similar to a previous application from the PI. Resubmissions will be assessed according to the review criteria for a new application, and must include a "Response to previous review" demonstrating substantive modification to the proposal addressing the reviewers’ comments. A pilot grant application can only be re-submitted once, for a total of two submissions.

### 2.5. PARTNERSHIP FUNDING

The MSSC reserves the right to establish funding partnerships with relevant provincial and federal funding agencies for any or all of its funding opportunities. Applicants will be notified in a timely manner of partnership terms and conditions.

The ratios for matching the partner's financial contribution (in cash and, if applicable, in-kind) will vary depending on the funding opportunity. The letter of agreement will specify the amounts to be contributed by both MSSC and the partner.

### 3. APPLICATION PROCESS AND GUIDELINE

#### 3.1. PILOT GRANT

Consider the following when preparing a pilot grant application:

**Research Proposal**: Provide a clear, concise description of your proposed activities in the Research Proposal attachment. The Research Proposal should stand alone (i.e. it should contain all of the information required to support your research plan and should contain a self-contained, complete description of your project).

In the Research Proposal, you should include:

- A description of the objective(s), central research questions/hypotheses and scientific aims of the project.
- Brief background on why you are conducting this work and how it is relevant to MS, with appropriate references to scientific literature.
• A description of the novelty and innovation of the project, with a discussion of how it will provide new knowledge that has not previously been tested and how it will encourage the pursuit of new areas of research in the field.
• A plan of investigation and methodology, including experimental methods, techniques and analyses that will be used to collect data and test the proposed hypotheses.
• A description of your qualifications and research environment, including relevant prior experience, productivity and skills, and capacity of your collaborators to address any knowledge and technical gaps, if applicable.
• A plan for building on the preliminary data gathered over the term of the pilot grant to pursue further funding and research to expand on the findings.

Other Requirements and Considerations:

• Pilot grant proposals need not demonstrate that sufficient preliminary data for the project has been collected in order to be competitive, as the objective of the pilot grant program is to provide seed funding for obtaining preliminary data that could be used as the basis for submitting larger grants and further pursuing the proposed research direction.
• A detailed breakdown of the proposed budget for the pilot grant as well as the curriculum vitae (CV) of the PI leading the project will be required as part of the application.

3.2. GENERAL CATEGORIES OF EXPENDITURES

Investigators may request funds for the following categories of expenditure: salaries for professional and non-professional personnel, patient costs, and consumable supplies.

Indirect costs: It is the policy of The MS Society of Canada that funds cannot be used for indirect costs or overhead costs in respect to the conduct of research (defined as costs associated with institution’s ongoing operating expenses such as facilities and basic utilities, the purchase and repair of office equipment, administration fees, property, environmental assessment and safety compliance, eating, lighting, ethics reviews etc.). These costs are not specific to individual research projects or programs and are therefore considered fundamental support services for the operation of the institution and its research facilities. As a member of the Health Charities Coalition of Canada, the MSSC believes that indirect costs are the responsibility of the institutions or the governments that support those institutions. Outstanding research results are the basis of sustained donor support, charitable donations will be applied directly toward research and not to university/government indirect costs.

Personnel: All personnel paid from grant funds shall be in accordance with the prevailing policies of the grantee institution. However, budgets for multi-year studies cannot include cost-of-living or similar salary increases for personnel working on the project. Requested salaries are not to be used to replace salaries or portions of salaries already assured by
institutional or other funds. Grant funds may not be used for purchasing, accounting, financial record keeping, laundry or student and tuition costs. All personnel must be funded within a Canadian Institution.

Stipend support for Postdoctoral Fellowships, Doctoral and Master’s Studentships are not permissible. Please visit the Funding Opportunities page for more information on the MS Society’s endMS Studentships and Fellowships.

Professional Support: The MSSC will not pay salaries of the Principal Investigators, Collaborators or Faculty members. Investigators are not considered employees of the MSSC but rather of the institution where the research is conducted. The research grant is to be administered in accordance with the prevailing policies of the sponsoring institution, including policies regarding statutory deductions, vacations, sick leaves, holidays, etc.

Technical and Non-professional support: Salaries for technical and non-faculty personnel may be requested in proportion to the time they will spend on the research directly supported by the grant. All technical and non-professional personnel must be funded within a Canadian Institution.

Equipment and Supplies: Funds can only be used for the purchase of small items of equipment and office supplies given that proper justification is provided.

Consumable supplies may include any type of laboratory supplies or office supplies relevant to the conduct of the study.

Travel: Use of funds for conference travel is not permitted. Travel necessary for the conduct of the study will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Other: Any other expenditure(s) directly related to the cost of conducting the proposed research may be requested in the application for a grant but must be properly justified. Construction or renovation costs are not permissible expenditures under any circumstances.

Reallocation of Funds: Transfers between and among categories of the budget approved in the grant may be made as follows: (1) transfers between and within personnel and consumable supplies categories may be made at the discretion of the grantee institution, but (2) no transfers may be made without prior approval in writing by the MSSC for items not specifically identified in the approved budget. Unless prior written approval has been obtained from the MSSC, expenditures are likely to be disallowed for items not specifically included in the budget of the grant awarded.

3.3. ONLINE APPLICATION PROCEDURE

The MSSC uses an online research grants and awards management system that enables researchers to apply for, and review, applications on the Web. The system is called Easygrants.
and can be accessed through the following website: https://www.mscanadagrants.ca. No hard copies of any documentation will be accepted.

Interested applicants must create a profile on Easygrants through which they can complete the application process. Page limits, list of required documents and other important application information can be found in the Online Application Guidelines. Note that all required documents must be fully completed and uploaded on Easygrants prior to the due date for the application to be considered. Additional documents will not be accepted past the deadline except for manuscripts which have been reviewed and are pending publication; additional published manuscripts must be submitted by e-mail to msresearchgrants@mssociety.ca at least two weeks before the in-person review committee meeting. Publications must be listed as In Progress/Pending in the CCV in order to be considered by the review committee.

All documents must adhere to the word or page limits assigned. Any content that surpasses the word or page limits will not be considered.

French Applications: The MSSC accepts applications in French; please refer to the MSSC Pilot Grant Application Guidelines (Programme de subventions de recherche lignes directrices relatives a une demade de financement) for more information.

4. REVIEW AND RESULTS

4.1. REVIEW PROCESS

4.1.1. Independent Review Committee

Applications submitted to the CPH pilot grant competition are reviewed by members of an independent review committee selected by the MSSC. The overarching principles inherent in the allocation of MSSC funds are excellence, equity of opportunity, impact and due diligence in the use of MSSC funds.

The MSSC engages the scientific and clinical communities as well the public in the review process. Individuals affected by MS who serve on the review committee are called community representatives. Involvement of community representatives ensures transparency of the review process and effective communication to public stakeholders. The committee includes a Chair, who is an established researcher in the MS scientific community who presides over the review meetings and guides the committee to a consensus rating. The committee also includes a scientific officer (SO), who is a senior MS researcher tasked with taking detailed notes throughout the review process.

Scientific reviewers assess the scientific merit, feasibility, novelty, and the human and research impact of each application. Community representatives review the lay components of each
application and provide feedback on whether the language was easy to comprehend and if the project relevant to their lived experience with MS. Approval and funding of grants is subject to the receipt of revised lay documents if necessary.

4.1.2. Evaluation of Applications and Triage

Once all applications are submitted, the MSSC collaborates with the committee Chair to assign applications to reviewers based on their expertise. Those reviewers who are in conflict with an application are re-assigned to a different application to avoid bias. Each pilot grant application is reviewed by two scientific reviewers – referred to as the primary reviewer and secondary reviewer – and one community representative based on the following review criteria:

**Review Criteria for Scientific Reviewers**

a. **Research approach:** clarity of study objectives, hypotheses and aims, adequate background and rationale for the study, and clear relevance to MS. Sound methodology, appropriateness of research design, and feasibility of research approach are also demonstrated.

b. **Originality of the proposal:** novel idea that has not been previously explored to a great extent for MS, with potential to create new knowledge and test a new approach, intervention, or concept that will advance the MS field.

c. **Impact of research:** addresses a significant need or gap in health research, with potential to improve quality of life for people with MS, and provide a strong foundation for further research.

d. **Investigator(s):** applicant(s) are highly qualified with experience in the proposed area of research, are scientifically productive and able to disseminate research findings to appropriate end-users.

e. **Resources and environment:** availability and accessibility of personnel, facilities and infrastructure required to conduct the research, suitability of the environment to conduct the proposed research and for the training of personnel.

f. **Budget:** realistic in terms of aims and methodology, adequate justification and compliance with MSSC policies.

**Review Criteria for Community Representatives**

Community representatives review the lay summaries of each pilot grant application. They provide an enthusiasm rating and comments based on the following:

- Comprehension/accessibility of the lay summary
- Relevance to critical needs and challenges faced by people affected by MS
• Capacity for the project to yield outcomes that will improve the health management of quality of life of people for people affected by MS.

**Scoring and Triage**

In addition to providing an evaluation, the scientific reviewers and community representatives assign a preliminary score or enthusiasm rating respectively for each application they review based on the charts below. The Chair and Scientific Officer (SO) do not assign preliminary scores. The scientific scores provide the MSSC and committee Chair with an indication of the quality of the proposals submitted. They also serve as benchmarks for determining which applications will be triaged. Any application that receives a score below 3.5 from both the primary and secondary reviewer will be considered for triage, and triaged applications will not be discussed during the review meeting. The community representative’s enthusiasm rating provides an indication of relevance to MS, potential impact, and comprehensibility to a lay audience.

**Scientific Scoring Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outstanding</td>
<td>4.5 – 4.9</td>
<td>May Be Funded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>4.0 – 4.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>3.5 – 3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>3.0 – 3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs revision</td>
<td>2.5 – 2.9</td>
<td>Not Fundable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs major revision</td>
<td>2.0 – 2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seriously flawed</td>
<td>1.0 – 1.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>0.0 – 0.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Community Representative Overall Enthusiasm Level Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Enthusiasm Level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Highly relevant with high potential to impact health and quality of life for people affected by MS; lay summary is well written using clear, understandable, and engaging language. No to minor revisions needed to lay documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Good with some relevance and potential for to impact health and quality of life for people affected by MS; lay summary is adequate in terms of using clear and engaging language, but still uses some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low relevance and little potential for impact for people affected by MS; poorly written and excessive use of technical language. Requires major revisions to lay documents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.3. In-Person Review and Final Recommendation

Once the scientific reviewers and community representatives evaluate the applications “at home”, the review committee meets in person to engage in an open discussion about the applications. For each application, the primary, secondary and community representative reviewers discuss their comments and bring up any issues that should be deliberated by the committee. The committee Chair then asks for a consensus score (a score that the two scientific reviewers can agree upon based on the discussion), after which each committee member (except for the Chair, SO and community representatives) votes within 0.5 points above or below the scientific consensus score.

Once all of the scores are tallied, the committee discusses a cut-off score for funding depending on the distribution of scores of the applications. Those applications that fall above the designated cut-off score are recommended for funding. Committee members who were identified as having a conflict of interest with a particular application must step out of the room during the review and scoring of the application.

4.1.4. Final Approval

A recommendation for funding is presented by to the MSSC’s Medical Advisory Committee (MAC) – a team of senior researchers and clinicians who oversee scientific and medical matters that impact the MSSC and its stakeholders. In this case, the MAC reviews the review committee’s recommendation through a wider lens of emerging trends in research and priorities of the MSSC, and provides a final recommendation to the MSSC’s National Board of Directors for approval.

4.2. COMMUNICATION OF RESULTS

All applicants are informed by email of the funding status of their grant applications regardless of the outcome. In addition, the MSSC provides each applicant with the scientific and lay evaluations of their application (which are anonymized), as well as notes from the SO.

For successful applications only, the MSSC will post limited information on the Web (i.e. name of the applicants, department, institution, term and amount of award, project title, and a summary of the research proposal). Results are not released over the phone. The MSSC does
not publish or otherwise disclose details related to unsuccessful applications.

Questions and Support

Please direct all inquiries regarding the funding opportunities to msresearchgrants@mssociety.ca