



# **Pilot Grants**

## **Review Guidelines and Criteria**

## **Review Guidelines and Criteria: Pilot Grants**

On behalf of the MS Society of Canada (MSSC), we would like to thank you for agreeing to serve as a reviewer. The success of the independent review process is made possible by dedicated people like you who generously give their time and expertise. Your efforts are greatly appreciated by the MSSC and our stakeholders.

### **COMPETITION OVERVIEW**

The primary aim of the MSSC is to stimulate and support research in multiple sclerosis (MS). Currently the MSSC welcomes pilot grant applications that fall under the clinical and population health stream, which includes topics such as symptom management and rehabilitation, patient management, epidemiology, health economics, risk factors, health care delivery/policy, and treatment monitoring. The approximate value of a pilot grant is \$50,000 per year for up to two years. Pilot grants are non-renewable. The MSSC welcomes applications from investigators who are conducting MS research in a Tri-Council recognized Canadian institution and who are eligible to hold research grants.

The 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 are not considered.

### **COMMITTEE ROLES:**

The composition of the independent review committee will include the following:

- **Chair** oversees the review process and acts as a facilitator to establish a positive, constructive, fair minded environment in which all applications under review are evaluated. The Chair is responsible for providing a report to the Medical Advisory Committee (MAC) outlining the outcomes of the review meeting.
- **Scientific Officer (SO)** supports the Chair during the review meeting; as such, the SO will not review applications. The SO is responsible for taking clear and concise notes that summarize the committee's discussion for each application which will be provided along with other review comments to the applicant.
- **Scientific Reviewers** are non-conflicted researchers recruited with specific expertise to provide a critical assessment and constructive written feedback based on MSSC review criteria for applications assigned to them. Scientific Reviewers will participate in the

review meeting to discuss and provide a quantitative assessment (score) for all non-conflicted applications.

- **Community Representatives** are people affected by MS who are invited to participate in the review meetings. The Community Representatives evaluate, through a non-scientific lens, the comprehensibility of the lay documents and discuss the relevance of the research to the MS community, and potential of the research to translate into meaningful impacts that will improve quality of life for people living with MS. Community Representatives will provide a qualitative assessment (enthusiasm rating) based on their assessment of the impact and relevance of non-conflicted applications.

## **THE REVIEW PROCESS**

The principles that guide the independent review at the MSSC are confidentiality, conflict of interest and fairness.

The evaluation of applications for funding has two steps: (1) an in-depth "at-home" review by at least two Scientific Reviewers (primary, secondary and possibly external) and one Community Representative to produce written evaluations, and (2) a committee meeting to discuss and rate the applications, from which the MSSC generates a rank-order priority list to inform its funding decisions.

Review of the applications will be based on the review criteria outlined below, and will be submitted by the committee via the MSSC's online grants platform [Easygrants](#).

After considering the review criteria, Scientific Reviewers will prepare written comments for each application to which they have been assigned as primary or secondary reviewer. They will provide a preliminary score using the scoring chart below. This score may be used by the Chair of the review committee for triage purposes, if needed.

The Community Representatives will provide written comments from a non-scientific perspective, and are asked to review relevant sections of all assigned applications. The Community Representative will assess the sections based on comprehensibility, impact and relevance to MS and a level of enthusiasm will be provided based on the specific review criteria provided.

The committee will convene for an in-person meeting which will go as follows: The Community Representative will state their enthusiasm level, after which the primary and secondary Scientific Reviewers will state their preliminary scores. The Community Representative will then discuss their assessment, highlighting any strengths or weakness of the lay documents and describing their enthusiasm for the application.

The primary Scientific Reviewer will present their assessment, describing the strengths and weaknesses of the application as a whole. The secondary Scientific Reviewer will follow, concentrating on points of agreement or disagreement and elaborating points not addressed by the primary reviewer.

The Chair will lead the committee into an overall discussion of the application. The Chair will then seek a consensus score from the primary and secondary Scientific Reviewers. Non-conflicted scientific committee members, excluding the Chair and Scientific Officer, will cast an individual confidential score within  $\pm 0.5$  of the consensus rating. The final score assigned to the proposal will be the average of these confidential scores. At the same time, the Community Representatives will also be requested to provide a final overall level of enthusiasm. A rank-order priority list will be generated of all applications to make funding decisions.

The committee's recommendation will be brought forward to the Medical Advisory Committee and the Multiple Sclerosis Board of Directors for final approval.

### **REVIEW CRITERIA**

The MSSC will transmit comments from each reviewer to the applicants whose proposals they reviewed. Please ensure your review is clear and concise, using objective and non-inflammatory language. Include justification for your comments and suggestions. Constructive advice to the applicant from the Scientific Reviewers will allow him/her to improve the quality and efficiency of the proposed research, while feedback from the Community Representatives will allow the applicant to potentially improve his/her lay documents and better articulate the impact of the proposed research. Please do not identify yourself to ensure the confidentiality of the research process.

#### **Scientific Reviewer:**

Provide a brief synopsis of the funding application, an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses and comment on issues that should be flagged. Use the following instructions and questions to guide your assessment.

#### **Research Proposal Description:**

Please provide a concise description of the research proposal, including the purpose of the proposal, the hypothesis to be tested and questions to be answered, the objectives to be achieved and the proposed approach and experiments.

#### **Critique of Research Proposal:**

- Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various aspects of the proposal.
- Are the research questions clear?
- Are the aims logical?
- Is the approach valid and adequately justified?
- Are the procedures feasible?

**Novelty and Originality:**

- Is this a novel idea that has not been previously explored to a great extent for MS (is this truly a pilot project)?
- Does the project have the potential to create new knowledge and/or test a new approach, intervention, or concept that will advance the MS field?
- Will the data generated from the project provide new lines of questioning and open new avenues of research in MS?

**Impact and Relevance:**

- Does the proposal address a significant need or gap in MS research and/or healthcare?
- Will the project contribute to the improvement of quality of life for people affected by MS?
- Does the proposal have an appropriate plan for dissemination and exchange of research findings?

**Investigators:**

- Discuss the capability and background of the investigators (such as qualifications, experience in the proposed area of research, productivity, ability to disseminate research findings).
- Discuss the appropriateness of the team of applicants (if applicable) to carry out the proposed research, in terms of complementarity of expertise and synergism.
- Identify any unusual aspects concerning personnel who will work on the project.

**Resources and Environment:**

- Comment on the availability and accessibility of personnel, facilities and infrastructure required to conduct the research.
- Discuss special aspects of facilities, equipment and extent of departmental and interdepartmental cooperation.
- Comment on the availability of special animal models, tissue preparation tools, clinical case materials, etc., as appropriate.
- Assess the suitability of the environment to conduct the proposed research.

**Budget:**

- Is the proposed budget realistic in terms of the proposed aims and methodology?
- Are all items justified on the basis of the approach, procedures and analysis of data proposed?
- Itemize and provide specific reasons for reductions in the time or amount recommended, if applicable.

- For supplementary requests, comment on supplementary budget in relation to the already approved parent budget.
- Please view the [MSSC policies](#) if you have any questions regarding expenditures in the budget section of the application.

**Preliminary Score:**

Please provide a preliminary score using the scoring chart below. This preliminary score will not be used for ranking purposes, and you will be asked to provide a final score on the day of the review meeting based on a consensus score.

**SCORING CHART**

<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Outstanding	4.5 – 4.9	May Be Funded – Will be Discussed by the Committee
Excellent	4.0 – 4.4	
Very good	3.5 – 3.9	
Acceptable	3.0 – 3.4	Not Fundable – May or May Not be Discussed by the Committee
Needs revision	2.5 – 2.9	
Needs major revision	2.0 – 2.4	
Seriously flawed	1.0 – 1.9	
Rejected	0.0 – 0.9	

### **Community Representative:**

Please read the following sections of the applications that have been assigned to you:

- **Impact and Relevance to MS**

Address the following questions in your written assessment:

#### **Language and Accessibility:**

- a) Does the applicant use clear, appropriate language to explain how the findings of their project will benefit people affected by MS?
- b) Does the applicant clearly explain background information and key concepts that form the foundation for the study? If not, what is missing or what can be improved?
- c) What feedback can you provide the applicant that would assist them in making the lay documents more understandable and relevant to the general public?

#### **Impact and Relevance for People Affected by MS:**

- a) What are the goals of the research study, and why is the study important to people affected by MS?
- b) Does the application have the potential to make a lasting influence on the health and quality of life and/or quality of clinical care among people affected by MS?
- c) In your view, does the application address a critical gap in knowledge or barriers to progress in the field of MS?
- d) Does the application bring hope and excitement to you as a person who is affected by MS, and will the outcomes of the research resound with the MS community in a positive way?
- e) Upon reading the lay documents, is it clear that the application will have an impact on the lives of those affected by MS? If not, how could the impact of this study be improved?

#### **Enthusiasm Level**

Please provide an enthusiasm level based on your feeling of how impactful and relevant you find the application using the chart below. You will be asked to provide a final enthusiasm level the day of the review meeting following discussion of the application by the committee.

### **ENTHUSIASM LEVEL CHART**

<b>Overall Enthusiasm Level</b>	<b>Definition</b>
High	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.
Moderate	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 technical language. Moderate revisions needed to lay documents.
Low	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.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

Scientific Reviewers and Community Representatives shall abide at all times by the Society's *Conflict of Interest Guidelines* and *Privacy and Confidentiality Policy*.

Prior to being given access to the applications for review, Scientific Reviewers and Community Representatives will be required to review, sign and submit MSSC's Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Policy form and declare conflicts of interest with applications. In instances where a Scientific Reviewer or Community Representative has declared a conflict of interest, he or she will not be allowed to review or comment on the applications, and will be excused from the meeting during those committee discussions.

### **EASYGRANTS ONLINE SYSTEM INSTRUCTIONS**

Register or log in to your account at <https://www.mscanadagrants.ca>. This will take you to the homepage.

Scroll down to the **My Tasks** tab; underneath you will see links to your tasks in blue. Select **Submit Review Comments**, which will take you to the **Main** page.

To view all of the applications, select **Download All** under the **Download Zip File** heading. Additionally, you can view each application individually by selecting **View PDF** under **Assignments**. Please note that you will only review and submit comments for the application(s) to which you have been assigned.

Select **Review** on the right side of each assignment. Provide a preliminary score or enthusiasm level in the space provided, and enter your comments. Select **Save and Close**. To submit your review select **Continue**. Under **Submission** select **Submit**.

To view your submission, select **View PDF** under **View All My Tasks**. Once submitted, all comments are considered final and cannot be altered.

**QUESTIONS?**

Please contact us at [msresearchgrants@mssociety.ca](mailto:msresearchgrants@mssociety.ca).