How to write a successful fellowship grant application

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Conflict of interest

• None
Summary

• ESMO fellowship opportunities
• ESMO research fellowship application tips
  – Translational Research
  – Clinical Research
• Grant Writing general tips
• Writing a research project proposal
• Fellowship grant specificities: 3 key points
  – Candidate’s personal background and profile
  – Motivation letter
  – Training program
    • growing self & training thinking process
ESMO Clinical or Translational Research Fellowships Application

• Completed online application form
• Digital photograph
• Detailed clinical/translational research project proposal including timelines
• Brief statement of project goals and how the acquired techniques will be used in the home institute/country
• Name of host institute and acceptance letter from the person responsible for the project at the host facility
• Letter of recommendation from the candidate’s department head
• Motivation Letter
• All applications must be submitted in English; incomplete applications will not be accepted
Translational and Clinical Research Fellowships Evaluation (ESMO)

• The Committee will consider the following criteria when reviewing applications and determining funding decisions:

• The extent and level of previous education (CV)
• Motivation letter
• Other professional training and publications
• Research project
  – Quality of the application, overall strategy, methodology, and proposed analyses of the research data as well as and appropriateness to accomplish the specific aims within the grant term.
  – Feasibility of the project given the time frame and the budget
Grant writing general tips

• to be part of the best possible team to accomplish the work proposed
  – to secure collaborators for areas in which you lack experience and training
• difficult to secure the attention of busy senior investigators, but it is a critical step toward securing funding for the work you propose
• grant writing, like any skill, can only be optimized by doing it repeatedly, so practice it!

Grant writing general tips

- Use clear and simple sentence structures, and avoid complicated words.
- Avoid se abbreviations to save space
- Use a reviewer friendly approach where the formatting is simple and the font readable, don’t reduce margins to save space. Do not overload
- Organize and use subheadings effectively
- Repeat topic or “mantra” sentences for each section that build the “story” of your grant in a logical and sequential way.
- Be consistent in specific aims and format throughout the application.
- Continuous spell-check, use spell-checking programs before submission, typos are unacceptable
- Review as many times as possible. Ask a colleague from a different field to read through the final draft before submission.
3 key points and the rest

• 1: Personal profile
• 2: Motivation letter is AS IMPORTANT AS anything
• 3: The training program

• 4: The rest: writing a research project proposal
Writing a research project proposal

• The right question
• A good hypothesis
• Aims
• The background and significance
• Preliminary studies
• Methods and design
The right question

• Don’t propose any research question that you really do not think you will enjoy for the “long term”.
• the “right” research question should lead to a hypothesis that is testable, that is based upon existing knowledge and fills and existing gap in specific areas of knowledge.
• That can be transformed into a feasible study plan.
• How does one find the “right” research question? Open your eyes and observe:
  – study: reading/teaching/discussing
  – exploit new technologies
  – patients often provide clues

S.P. Glasser (ed.), Essentials of Clinical Research, 317
" Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2008
A good hypothesis

• is feasible, interesting, novel, ethical, manageable in scope, and relevant.
  – Ask for colleagues opinions

• address whether the results of your study will confirm extend, or refute prior findings, or provide new knowledge.
  – is the question too broad or vague to be reasonably answered?

• include only experiments that are feasible
  – You, your team and your host institution have the expertise and resources to conduct

Aims

• a brief introduction that underscores the clinical relevance of the proposal
• the most important findings to date
• the problem that the proposed research will address
• Each aim maximum 5 lines, 2 to the statement of the aim, 3 to back-up
The background and significance

• What is the current **state of knowledge** in this field?
• What **gaps in knowledge** will this project fill?
• More generally, **why** is this line of research important?
Preliminary studies

• this section also uses the previous results to demonstrate the feasibility of your proposed project by your team

• particularly important for junior investigators where there may be inadequate investigator experience or training for the proposed research, a limited publication record, and/or a team that lacks the skill set required for the research proposed

Design and methods
this is the section where many reviewers begin to read

• re-set “the scene” by refreshing the reviewer regarding the overview for each specific aim.
• use one paragraph to overview each specific aim, and then to deal with each sub-aim separately.
• be clear, concise, yet detailed regarding how you will collect and analyze your data, avoid basic technical details
• ALWAYS include a statistical plan including the tests to perform
  – address threats to both internal and external validity (technical and clinical)
• Anticipate data interpretation and conclusions based on the expected outcome, or on the chance that you find different results than expected

Fellowship grant specificities

• It is more about YOU than a specific attached project, YOU are the asset, YOU are the project
• Society wants fellowship grant recipients to get the best out of their fellowship program
• And then return it to society
• You have to sell yourself
  – Convince the reviewers that you will derive the greatest personal and professional growth from the training program and then return it to society
HOW: 3 key points

• 1: Personal profile
• 2: Motivation letter is AS IMPORTANT AS anything
• 3: The training program (include mentorship committee)
Personal profile and past history

• Previous background and past history coherent with the proposed program
  • Clinical program versus translational program
  • MD focused versus PhD focused

• Personal introspection
  – lab technical skills, bedside manners, statistics, complex problem solving
  – Personality traits, social skills
  – Writing skills, oral skills
Motivation letter

- First thing to read by reviewer.
- Driving force can overcome any challenge, be it personal limitation or environmental
- NOTHING can overcome lack of PASSION
The training program (include mentorship committee)

• The contents of the training program is much more than a list of clinical trials or a fantastic translational research study
• Needs to be coherent with applicant’s background
• Focused on the candidate development, not on the trials or projects
• List of deliverables of acquired skills and personal growth developments
  – Include a Timeline table with your aims and activities by year
• Target your grant to the expected audience (i.e., your reviewers)
• Build the program with your mentors
• Obtain feed back from external reviewers if possible
Growing self & Training the thinking process

• Holistic approach to personal training
  – lead yourself, teamwork, cooperation, group dynamics, human psychology, how to communicate, how to deal with conflict, time management, balancing work and life

• We ALL need to change the thinking process in order to innovate

• Transforming the practice of Oncology is urgent!!!