May 11, 2021

TO:   NICHD Division of Intramural Research  
      NICHD Division of Intramural Population Health Research

FROM:  Director, NICHD  
       Scientific Director, NICHD

SUBJECT:  2021 NICHD Directors Early Career Awards

We were extremely pleased by the robust response to this new program as part of NICHD’s  
continued commitment to the ongoing development of early career scientists. This program is  
part of NICHD OD’s ongoing programs to develop the scientific workforce in promotion of  
NICHD’s mission and our most recent strategic plan.

We received 50 applications, of which we were able to fund 22. To promote transparency, we  
have attached a detailed discussion of the scoring and funds distribution below. Awardees will  
be notified by the OSD and all applicants will receive the reviewers’ feedback on their proposals.

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Attachment
Explanation of Comments and Scoring:

The proposals were reviewed by a committee of seven NICHD investigators that included experts in neurobiology, membrane biology, development, genetics, epidemiology, and clinical research. Each proposal was evaluated for strength in three areas:

- Productivity and credentials of candidate relative to career stage
- Impact of proposal on career development of the candidate
- Scientific merit of proposal

These three criteria were specifically selected to evaluate the potential impact the award would have on advancing the career of the candidate. Projects that significantly overlapped with existing research were not favored because they were viewed to benefit the labs more than the careers of the candidates. Each of the three criteria was assigned a score of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the best rating. With this system of scoring the proposals were each reviewed by three members of the committee. The scores from each reviewer of a proposal were averaged to generate a final number. Each reviewer provided brief comments highlighting strengths and weaknesses.

Funding Distribution:

After scoring, the proposals were divided into three categories: Basic science (36/50 proposals), Epidemiology/Population Health (3/50 proposals), and Clinical Studies (11/50 proposals). The total funding ($390,000) was divided between these categories in proportion to the number of proposals within each category. For example, the basic science category received 72% of $390,000, or $280,800.

Within each category, the funds were distributed according to the rankings from the review committee. We were able to fund 14 basic science applicants, 3 Epidemiology/Population Health applicants, and 5 clinical applicants.

Combined, the proposals provided a unique snapshot of research activities at NICHD. Excellent research proposals covered a wide range of topics including molecular genetics, development, epidemiology, and clinical studies. Importantly, committee members found some of the proposals were written with a specific expertise in mind, making it more challenging to evaluate for reviewers from other areas. For example, some studies centered on molecular genetics of model organisms but did not provide the context required for an expert in clinical research. Others described clinical studies, yet lacked the explanation needed for a microbiologist or geneticist to appreciate its significance. Because the committee was composed of many different disciplines, successful proposals had to be appreciated by a diversity of expertise. Language that is accessible to a range of experts provides a great advantage in writing proposals and grants. Comments were given as examples to help candidates improve the accessibility of their writing.