# POLICY STATEMENT

## *Health and Medical Research Fund*

**HEALTH BUREAU**

## Preamble

Over the past decade, the Health Bureau (HHB) has provided dedicated funding support for health and medical research in two areas, namely public health & health services and control of infectious diseases. The *Health and Health Services Research Fund* (HHSRF) and the *Research Fund for the Control of Infectious Diseases* (RFCID) provided funding support specific for research in these areas over and above the general funding for local tertiary academic institutions and health and medical institutions. These funds have generated evidence-based scientific knowledge that has informed health policies and been applied to health services and clinical practices leading to improvements in population health.

Building on the successful experience of the HHSRF and RFCID, and leveraging on the expertise established to support health and medical research, in December 2011 HHB created a new **Health and Medical Research Fund** (HMRF) by consolidating the HHSRF and RFCID and expanding the funding scope to cover specific areas of advanced medical research.

In order to create synergy and provide more flexibility in the support of health and medical research and health promotion efforts, the HMRF and the *Health Care and Promotion Fund* (HCPF) were consolidated on 28 April 2017, with the HCPF renamed as *Health Care and Promotion Scheme* (HCPS).

HHB oversees the operation of the HMRF at the policy level. A Research Council has been established by the Secretary for Health to oversee the research direction and administration of the Fund.

This Policy Statement lays down the overall framework and policies of the Fund. Procedures, guidance notes or any materials that assist the operation of the HMRF should be consistent with this document.

Approval of exceptions is on the discretion of the Research Council on a case-by-case basis.

Research Fund Secretariat
Research and Data Analytics Office
Health Bureau
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government

# 1. OVERALL FRAMEWORK

## 1.1 Mission

The Health and Medical Research Fund (HMRF) aims to build research capacity and to encourage, facilitate and support health and medical research to inform health policies, improve population health, strengthen the health system, enhance healthcare practices, advance standard and quality of care, and promote clinical excellence, through generation and application of evidence-based scientific knowledge derived from local research in health and medicine. It also provides funding support to evidence-based health promotion projects that help people adopt healthier lifestyles by enhancing awareness, changing adverse health behaviours or creating a conducive environment that supports good health practices.

## 1.2 Scope

The HMRF will consider funding health and medical research/projects in the following areas –

(a) public health, human health and health services (e.g. primary care, non-communicable diseases, Chinese medicine, etc.);
(b) prevention, treatment and control of infectious diseases, in particular emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases;
(c) advanced medical research which applies advanced technologies including but not limited to biotechnology in medicine, use of drugs and treatments, clinical trials, virtual health such as telemedicine, etc., to facilitate the translation of knowledge generated from health and health services or infectious diseases studies into clinical practice and to inform health policy; and
(d) health promotion that facilitates mobilisation of local resources to promote good health and prevention of illness in the community.

## 1.3 Funding

The HMRF will support research/projects initiated by individual investigators, in addition to those commissioned by the Health Bureau, to address health problems, fill scientific gaps and respond to public threats or needs. The normal grant ceiling for an investigator-initiated research project and a health promotion project is HK$1,500,000 while that for a research fellowship award is HK$1,200,000. Higher grants may be awarded where justified.

## 1.4 Thematic priorities

The HMRF will establish a focused research/health promotion agenda in which thematic priorities are formulated to guide the decision on fund allocations.

# 2. ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

## 2.1 Introduction

The Research Council chaired by the Secretary for Health is responsible for providing strategic steer for funding health and medical research projects and health promotion projects, and overseeing the administration of the HMRF including the allocation of funds for approved grants. The Research Council is supported by the Referee Panel, Grant Review Board and Grant Review Board Executive as the technical arm. The Research Fund Secretariat provides administrative and logistic support to the Research Council and its constituent boards and panels.

## 2.2 Research Council

2.2.1 **Role and Responsibilities**: The Research Council (RC) assumes fiduciary responsibility for all aspects of the administration of the HMRF and the allocation of funds for approved grants. The RC appoints members to the Grant Review Board. The funding decision of the RC is final.

2.2.2 **Composition**: The Secretary for Health /Permanent Secretary for Health appoints the RC members normally for a two-year term.

2.2.3 **Terms of Reference**: The terms of reference for the RC are –

(a) Determine research agenda and funding control mechanism of the HMRF;
(b) Approve procedures for inviting, and criteria for vetting grant applications;
(c) Approve standard terms and conditions for grant holders;
(d) Approve funding allocation after peer review process;
(e) Approve processes for the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of approved research/projects;
(f) Establish Grant Review Board to carry out the technical work of the RC;
(g) Disseminate key findings of funded projects; and
(h) Supervise the management and investment of the Fund.

## 2.3 Grant Review Board

2.3.1 **Role and Responsibilities**: Through the Grant Review Board (GRB) all applications to the HMRF open calls, final and dissemination reports for funded grants are subject to peer review for their scientific merit and compliance with the scope of funding. The GRB acts as the technical advisor to the RC and makes recommendations with regard to initial funding, requests for additional funds and assesses the outcomes of funded research/projects.

2.3.2 **Composition**: Members are appointed by the RC and are drawn from a wide spectrum of medical, health, social and analytical sciences. Potential members are identified through established network, publications, scientific roles and committee meetings or collaborative work. Secretary for Health nominates and appoints the GRB Chairpersons.

2.3.3 **Terms of Reference**: The GRB's terms of reference are –

(a) Advise Standard Operating Procedures for the grant submission and review process, and the assessment and dissemination of final reports;
(b) Review and assess applications and recommend projects for funding;
(c) Review and assess final and dissemination reports;
(d) Promote the development of research in the areas of health and health services, controlling infectious diseases, advanced medicine and health promotion in the wider community;
(e) Monitor the progress of approved projects; and
(f) Monitor the financial performance of approved projects.

## 2.4 Grant Review Board Executive

2.4.1 **Role and Responsibilities**: The Grant Review Board Executive (GRBE) is established to assist the GRB on an *ad hoc* basis, to consider/suggest amendments to Standard Operating Procedures, deal with matters arising from funded grants, monitor grant activity, deal with requests for additional funding or changes to the study proposal.

2.4.2 **Composition**:

- Grant Review Board Chairpersons
- Members of the Grant Review Board (Optional)
- Key Secretariat personnel

2.4.3 **Terms of Reference**: The terms of reference for the GRBE are –

(a) Assess and recommend action (on behalf of the GRB) on requests for additional funds, budget revision and/or reallocation, changes to study design or methods, and changes to the principal applicant or administering institution;
(b) Monitor the quality of the peer review including the assignment of referees to grants for review;
(c) Monitor the response of grant applicants and grant holders to requests by the GRB;
(d) Evaluate and advise the GRB regarding changes to the grant or final report review process; and
(e) Advise the Research Fund Secretariat on the monitoring of the progress of current research/projects.

## 2.5 Referee Panel

2.5.1 **Role and Responsibilities**: Individual members of the Referee Panel, according to their specific field of expertise, are selected to review grant applications for funding on the basis of scientific merit and to assess the outcomes of funded projects.

2.5.2 **Composition**: Local and non-local referees/experts are identified through a variety of sources: recommendation of the RC and GRB members, bibliographic sources such as Medline, nomination by principal applicants, the reference section of the grant proposal or through internet contacts particularly in evidence-based literature.

2.5.3 **Terms of Reference**: The terms of reference for the Referee Panel are –

(a) Assess the scientific merit of submitted grant proposals in terms of
- originality
- scientific content
- design and methods
- statistical analysis
- outcome measures
- research ethics

(b) Assess the relevance of the proposal to the thematic priorities and the applicability of the research/project to the local context; and

(c) Assess the 'value for money' of the research/project as presented in the final and dissemination reports.

## 2.6 Research Fund Secretariat

2.6.1 **Role and Responsibilities**: The Research Fund Secretariat (the Secretariat) supports all the activities of the RC including executing the grant application review process, monitoring the progress and financial status of funded grants, assessing and processing requests for amendments, and disseminating final reports.

2.6.2 **Composition**:
- Head (Research and Data Analytics Office)
- Scientific review professionals
- Grant management professionals
- Secretariat executives
- Other executives and supporting staff

2.6.3 **Terms of Reference**: The terms of reference of the Secretariat are –

(a) Support the operations of the RC, GRB, GRBE and Referee Panel; and

(b) Maintain administrative information systems needed to support the work of the RC, GRB and GRBE.

# 3. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

## 3.1 Definition

A conflict of interest arises when a person's judgement concerning a primary interest, such as scientific knowledge, could be unduly influenced by a secondary interest, such as personal advancement or financial gain.

## 3.2 Disclosure or Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Financial or academic conflict of interest should be disclosed to the appropriate body (RC, GRB and the Secretariat) in a timely and transparent manner. A 2-tier reporting system is adopted –

(a) **1st tier** – member to register interest upon appointment;
(b) **2nd tier** – member to report to Chairperson when an actual or potential conflict of interest in any matter under consideration by the committee. Declarations of conflict of interest should be made verbally during a meeting or in writing to the Chairperson. Failure to disclose conflicts of interest will result in the person's track record with the Fund being adversely affected.

## 3.3 Conflict of Interest and the Grant Review Board

GRB members when named as an applicant must leave the meeting and not take part in the discussion or review process. GRB members who are colleagues or associates of an applicant (e.g. head or senior member of the same department) are not normally asked to leave the meeting. However, they would not be asked to participate in the discussion but might be asked for points of clarification. This approach has been found to be acceptable and practicable.

# 4. CONFIDENTIALITY

**4.1** The RC, GRB, GRBE and Secretariat will abide by internationally recognised standards of personal information in medical research and complying with the local requirements of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Cap 486).

**4.2** It is the principal applicant and administering institution's responsibility to ensure that any conditions relating to data protection in Hong Kong are observed.

# 5. ALLEGATION OF SCIENTIFIC MISCONDUCT

## 5.1 Definition

Scientific misconduct means fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, or other practices that seriously deviate from those that are commonly accepted within the scientific community for proposing, conducting, or reporting research. It does not include honest error or honest differences in interpretations or judgements of data.

## 5.2 Allegation of Scientific Misconduct

Allegations of scientific misconduct are, fortunately, rare but the RC takes them very seriously as part of its responsibility to the public and the scientific community. In the event of research misconduct found during the course of funded research/projects, the RC will withdraw funding support immediately.

The administering institution should have in place adequate systems to ensure the quality of research that is carried out by their staff. Effective mechanisms for identifying scientific misconduct and agreed procedures for investigating allegations of such misconduct should be clearly publicised by the administering institution.

## 5.3 Preparation of Grant Applications

5.3.1 The Principal Applicant is responsible for ensuring that the submitted grant application and all supplementary materials (where applicable) comprise **original work** and are not plagiarised (or self-plagiarised) from other sources according to the definitions in 5.3.2 and 5.3.3. Plagiarism, including self-plagiarism, is not tolerated and is considered as a type of serious misconduct.

5.3.2 Plagiarism is the appropriation or use of the work of others for example, copying sentences, paragraphs, sections or whole articles from other publications without acknowledgement or credit. Apart from words, figures, tables, images and software, etc., can also be considered plagiarism if the source is not acknowledged.

5.3.3 Self-plagiarism occurs when researchers reuse their own data or previously published work without appropriate acknowledgement that the material had previously been published.

# 6. ADMINISTRATIVE GUIDELINES

## 6.1 Grant Application

The HMRF will support studies/projects initiated by individual investigators as well as those commissioned by the HHB to build research capacity, fill knowledge gaps, support policy formulation, address specific issues, assess needs and threats, support evidence-based health promotion, etc.

For commissioned studies/projects, only institutions specially invited by the HHB will be eligible to submit a portfolio of research/projects for consideration.

An annual funding round will normally be issued in the fourth quarter of the year for the HMRF investigator-initiated research and health promotion projects. The Secretariat maintains an updated database of all funded grants.

## 6.2 Grant Review Process

6.2.1 Research applications are assessed in two stages, first by non-local referees, and then by the GRB and non-local experts according to the criteria set out below. The identity of the referees/experts/GRB members will not be revealed to the grant applicants to protect confidentiality.

Grant review criteria –

- originality of the research topic
- relevance to the scope of funding and thematic priorities
- significance of the research question
- quality of scientific content
- credibility for study design and method
- feasibility of the intended project
- research ethics
- translational potential/value
- justification of requested budget

The GRB will also take into account the past performance and track records of the grant applicant(s), research capability of the administering institution, and the proposal's value for money when considering the funding recommendation. The RC will review and endorse the funding recommendations of the GRB. The GRB will provide specific feedback for each application.

6.2.2 Health promotion applications are assessed in two stages, first by non-local referees, and then by the GRB according to the criteria set out below –

- relevance to the scope of funding and thematic priorities
- scientific evidence of effectiveness of the proposed health promotion activities
- innovation, impact and sustainability of the programme
- cross-sector collaboration
- potential to build community capacity in health promotion

- feasibility and justification of requested budget

The GRB will also take into account the past performance and track records of the grant applicant(s), capability of the administering institution, and the proposal's value for money when considering the funding recommendation. The RC will review and endorse the funding recommendations of the GRB. The GRB will provide specific feedback for each application.

## 6.3 Financial Arrangement

*Commissioned Projects*
Release of funds will be tied to the attainment of interim objectives of the activities and the project timelines accepted by the RC.

*Investigator-initiated Research Projects and Health Promotion Projects*
The RC shall pay claims of up to 80% (or 90% for grant amount of HK$100,000 or below) of the approved grant and the balance when a final report, a dissemination report and an audited account are submitted to the satisfaction of the RC.

Only the direct costs attributable to the project will be covered by the grant allocation. The costs of premises, salaries for established academic or service staff (e.g. those funded by University Grants Committee/Research Grants Council), or overhead charges will not be supported. Limited conference expenses of up to HK$10,000 may be included in the grant application.

## 6.4 Monitoring of Research/Project Progress

To minimise the potential failure to meet targeted aims, the GRB will implement a process for the ongoing review of funded grants. Interim reports with financial summary have to be submitted yearly and reviewed by the GRB and the Secretariat.

All requests for amendments to the study/project design or methods will be subject to peer review.

The RC reserves the right to withhold funds or terminate the award at any time if the grant fails to show satisfactory performance or if the applicants are in breach of the terms and conditions of the grant stipulated in the Agreement.

## 6.5 Dissemination of Research/Project Results

On completion of approved projects, all grant holders must submit a final report and dissemination report to the Secretariat. The final and dissemination reports will be assessed and graded by the GRB. The RC will disseminate the outcomes of research/project funded by the HMRF. From time to time, principal applicants may be required to conduct press conferences, attend the HHB Journal Club meetings, or participate in other activities to publicise or disseminate findings from projects supported by the HMRF.