Writing (and winning) grants

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In today’s presentation...

• My early experiences
• Building your track record
• Writing grant applications
• Tips to improve success
1. My experience

- It took me 5 years after I finished my PhD to win my first grant
- It was for $35,000 from Diabetes Australia – I felt like I was King of the World
- Since then I have won collaborative grants totalling over $25 million
My funding sources (past 5 years)

National Health & Medical Research Council
Australian Research Council
National Heart Foundation of Australia
Diabetes Australia Research Trust
Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute
UK World Cancer Research Fund
NHMRC-European Union Collaborative Research Grants Scheme
FP7-PEOPLE-2009-IRSES
Bupa Foundation (UK)
Medibank (health insurer)
MBF Foundation (health insurer)
What happened that helped me win that first grant?

I stopped working hard and started working smart

• I identified who I could team up with; worked with them over time to develop common goals and strategies

• I carved out our niche – published in it, trained students in it, took steps to raise my profile in it, and didn’t stray from it!

• I got to know the opportunities in our field, and got to know our stakeholders

• I worked to understand all the funding schemes relevant to our work – what do they/don’t they fund?

• I took every opportunity to benchmark our research (conferences; visiting fellows scheme, overseas visits)

• I created quality time and space to work together on collaborative research
How to work smart

• Success is not about being lucky. Plan for success and be strategic in everything you do.
• Hold strategic planning meetings at least twice a year to review progress and actions
• Implement a strategy to identify and attract excellent students
• Publish like there is no tomorrow!
• Form writing teams and go on writing retreats at least twice a year
• Look out for and look after your team, particularly other ECR and student members
• Think carefully about who you team up with and collaborate with
2. How to build track record
Building research track record

- Research track record = publications (first) and grant income (second)

- Early in your career publications are critically important (later they are just very important) – ‘Publish or Perish’

- It is possible to publish without any external grant funding:
  - Good research does not have to cost a lot!
  - Small internal grants may be available
  - Can publish review articles (stake your claim)
  - Work with HDR students leading to publication
  - Collaborate with others who have data or value add to existing studies. In my view ECRs do not often enough take advantage of these opportunities
Building research track record

• Lots of people have good research ideas (grant proposals)
  – If you want your project funded need to demonstrate you will be highly productive with the money you receive (papers)

• Writing needs to be more of a priority for all of us
  – Aim for good papers in the highest impact journal possible – aim for international journals
  – Early in your career the number of papers is important, but must always keep one eye on journal impact factor
Building research track record

- **Prioritize writing**, otherwise it will always slip to the bottom of our ‘to-do’ tasks
  - Create quality time and space for writing
    - Use time management strategies in the office
    - Plan to get out of the office to write
    - Go on writing retreats if possible (can be at home)
  - Be pragmatic
    - Writing papers is an exercise in ‘joining the dots’
    - Set realistic timelines but stick with them
  - Form writing teams as appropriate
    - Helps with WAB (Writing Avoidance Behaviour)
    - Can be an excellent way to quickly progress papers
Where to begin?

- Early in career – very difficult to secure major project funding as lead investigator
- Often better to start with applications for internal funding and smaller grants
- Look for opportunities to collaborate with established researchers as a co-applicant in larger schemes
  - Track record
  - Experience in the grant writing process
Have a plan!


- Be hands-on with research projects
- Prioritize meetings on research projects over other activities
- Provide timely feedback on project methodology and draft manuscripts
- Meet informally with PIs on collaborative projects to discuss projects status
- Meet informally with postdoctoral fellows regularly to discuss their work
- Lead the writing of at least 3 papers annually
- Map writing schedule for the year in concert with collaborators
- Make use of a research assistant to conduct data analysis
- Implement regular writing days at Deakin city centre facility
- Participate in three writing retreats/year to progress paper planning
- Submit at least one Category 1 grant application
- Discuss the opportunities to add value to our program with senior staff
- Quarantine time for focused reading of the literature
- Appoint a research assistant to conduct literature review and summarize
- Allocate internal funding to support pilot data collection
- Schedule dedicated times to draft grant application
- Spend time working with colleagues overseas
- Schedule a brief visit annually with colleagues around international conferences
- Schedule a month in UK in 2017 to explore approaches to growing research teams

At any stage of your career you need a 3-5 year plan
3. Writing the grant
Planning for success

- Overnight successes are rare – persistent & strategic effort and planning are required

- Long range planning
  - Planning your research: research question, methods, pilot data
  - Key publications
  - Collaborators/team

- Short(er) term planning
  - Application deadlines
  - Writing the application
  - Make yourself a funding calendar & start working towards that
Who is reviewing your proposal?

• Consider them during your writing. Try to put yourself in their position
• Aim to make the reviewer’s job as easy as possible
• What do you need to tell them to convince them your research question is important and that you can do it?
• Understand the review process, look at the funding criteria, review and descriptors of “outstanding” and “excellent” grants
Significance and innovation

• Many potential questions out there, but not all are worth answering. Why does your research matter?
• Need to make a case that answering the question will make a difference & that it is a novel question
• Need to make clear the significance of what you are proposing to do – so the reviewer doesn’t read it and ask ‘so-what?’
• Why does this question need to be answered now?
Feasibility

• You need to demonstrate the feasibility of the project
  ➢ Have you used these methods/protocols before?
  ➢ Can you recruit your subjects?

• Pilot data will usually make a huge difference to funding success

• Early planning - identify key pilot data to support your rationale and demonstrate feasibility

• Fellowships - propose a research program you can feasibly do, given salary provided but little no project funds
Writing the application

• Ask to see successful applications of colleagues
• Follow the instructions
  - Read them every year
  - Go to your local grant information sessions
• Write clearly
  - Minimize your use of jargon, state things simply
  - Define your terms clearly
• Format appropriately
  - Bold, bullets/italicize key points, leave some spaces!
• Provide evidence of your statements and be specific
4. Improving your chance of success
Tips for improving your chances of success

1. Track record
2. Good collaborators/team
3. Give yourself enough time
4. Take on board feedback
5. Repeated attacks
6. Review other people’s grants
1. Track record

• Develop applications in the area that you have track record
  ➢ Core content/topic, key methods, targets groups
  ➢ Therefore, you need to focus your track record enough to be competitive in an area
  ➢ Identify your key research area and be identifiable as an expert

• Planning
  ➢ Identify the benchmarks/criteria - identify & address your weak spots
  ➢ What opportunities do you need to seek out or watch out for?
  ➢ Are there key papers you need to publish?
2. Good collaborators/team

- Collaborate with senior colleagues who have a (good) track record
- Team with breadth of skills you need for the project with the track record
- Will provide input and feedback
- Best to have some evidence of some previous working relationship (eg publications, student supervision)
- Good collaborators get "booked up" early
- Clearly explain the role and contribution of each collaborator/investigator
3. Give yourself enough time

• Need to put aside adequate time
  ➢ Reading, writing, reflection
  ➢ Review by other investigators, internal review processes
  ➢ Incorporate feedback
  ➢ Advice from statisticians (often impacts on methods and budget)
  ➢ Overloaded online systems
4. Take advice

• Be prepared to share your application and listen to what people say
• If they haven't understood your grant then maybe it is your writing and that is good feedback
• Resubmissions - might still need to rework substantially
• Incorporate or address major comments in future applications (eg. explain ‘why’ a decision taken to head off criticism)
5. Be persistent

- One idea/project to many sources
- Can lead to lots of rejection so you need resilience
- Look to value add, down size projects as required by budget limitations, slice projects into phases/components that can go to other agencies
- Maximises your chance of gain from your efforts as not re-writing from scratch

**BUT:** target the right funding agencies and re-work it with that agency in mind
6. Review other people's grants

- If you are given the chance to review for funding schemes, then try to fit it in your schedule
- Opportunity to understand the review process from the reviewer’s process
- Chance to look at how other people approach their grant writing and how decisions about funding are actually made
Closing remarks

• Most of us work hard, but many of us do not work smart

• Everyone, regardless of career stage, needs a 3-5 year plan

• It is critical to team up, and for the team to work strategically

• Writing has to be a priority to position yourself to win the next grant