



NHMRC Assessor Guidance Module - Declarations of Interest Transcript

Introduction

This guidance module provides information on NHMRC's Disclosure of Interests process, for the purpose of peer review of grant applications.

The information provided in this module is not exhaustive and does not replace the advice within the relevant scheme's Grant Opportunity Guidelines or Peer Review Guidelines.

Section one covers the background and justification for identifying and declaring interests. Section two, provides practical advice and common examples, to help you get your declarations right, the first time. Achieving this reduces your workload, and contributes to the rigour and integrity of NHMRC's peer review system.

Please note, conflicts of interest and suitability declarations are undertaken in NHMRC's grant management system, in tandem.

Section one – Background and justification

Conflicts of interest have the potential to compromise, or have the appearance of compromising professional judgement and the ability to make unbiased decisions.

The NHMRC Act requires you to disclose any relevant interests in writing before you are granted full access to applications that are assigned to you.

The Situation Table in the Peer Review Guidelines provides guidance and examples for disclosing your conflicts. It refers to personal and professional activity and relationships, and articulates how different conflict situations are defined. Before you begin, familiarise yourself with this table, and have it on hand as you make your way through your allocated list of applications.

Based on the information provided for every declaration, an NHMRC officer makes a ruling on your ability to assess each application. It's vital that you provide enough detail when describing your interests – this enables accurate rulings by NHMRC and maintains the integrity of the process. If initial declarations are clear, accurate and detailed, it limits the need for NHMRC to follow up with you, thereby reducing your workload and making the process more efficient.

Declarations that aren't clear or accurate can result in delayed timelines and potential scenarios in which assessors with the most relevant expertise are not assigned to applications.

Section two – Practical advice and examples

To identify and disclose any interests, you need to review the summary of each grant application assigned to you. Summaries consist of; project title, research team, administering and participating institutions, classification and synopsis.

This process is a self-assessment, and relies on the honesty and accuracy of each peer reviewer. You must provide an indication as to your level of conflict with all applications. You may select 'I require a ruling' if your interest falls outside the examples provided in the Situation Table, and you are not sure of the level of conflict to be disclosed.

Detailed instructions on how to download application summaries, and record your declarations in NHMRC's grant management system will be provided by your Secretariat.

When describing details of an interest, keeping in mind WHO, WHERE, WHAT and WHEN will help NHMRC quickly determine the level of conflict that may apply, and increases our ability to utilise your expertise in peer review.

We will now provide examples to illustrate how to effectively disclose your interests, noting, that these should not be considered an exhaustive list of scenarios.

Example One:

Dr A works at Macquarie University, and has been appointed as an NHMRC peer reviewer. Noticing the CIA listed on an application summary also works at Macquarie University, but in a different school and department, Dr A records this conflict as a LOW, stating: Works at Macquarie

In accordance with NHMRC policy, Dr A was correct in declaring a LOW conflict. However, from the information provided, the reviewing NHMRC officer cannot make an informed or accurate ruling.

Further phone and email correspondence is required to clarify the nature of the relationship, resulting in additional time and work for Dr A and the NHMRC officer.

A more detailed declaration would be:

The CIA and I both currently work at Macquarie University, in different schools and departments and do not know each other.

Given that this is a LOW conflict of interest, Dr A would be considered to assess this application by NHMRC.

Timing does not always allow NHMRC the opportunity to seek further clarification from the peer reviewer. In these instances, NHMRC would need to work with the information that was provided, and would make an assumption on the side of caution. This would mean a HIGH ruling, which would unnecessarily prevent the assessor from assessing an application they may be able to assess.

Example Two:

Professor B, an appointed NHMRC peer reviewer, recognises the CIB on an application summary, having co-authored a large multi-author paper two years ago. Professor B records this as a LOW conflict, stating.

Co-published 2 years ago

The reviewing NHMRC officer is unable to uphold a LOW conflict declaration without clarifying the number of authors or the nature of relationship with the CIB.

A more detailed declaration would be:

I published with CIB two years ago on a twenty-author paper. We had no direct communication.

Given that this is a LOW conflict of interest, Professor B would be considered to assess this application by NHMRC.

Example Three

Associate Professor C works at the University of Adelaide, and has been appointed as an NHMRC peer reviewer. Recognising that the CIB on an application summary is employed by the same institution, but is unknown to them, Associate Professor C declares a LOW conflict stating: Same institution.

From the information provided, the reviewing NHMRC officer cannot make an informed or accurate ruling. Further correspondence takes place between the NHMRC Officer and Associate Professor C. While the peer reviewer has not had any direct contact with the CIB they are in fact in the same School. According to NHMRC policy this constitutes a HIGH conflict of interest. The NHMRC Officer overrules the LOW declaration and Associate Professor C is no longer eligible to assess the application.

To avoid this scenario, a more detailed declaration would be:

CIB and I currently work at the same University and School. I do not know the CIB and we have no direct collaborations.

Relevant interests must be disclosed prior to application assessment, however new or previously unrecognised interests can and must be disclosed to NHMRC as soon as possible. These may arise at any stage of the process.

For example

Professor D is an appointed NHMRC peer reviewer and is working on completing his assessments. While reviewing an application Professor D notices the CIB began working in his lab in the period since declaring their interests. According to NHMRC policy, this constitutes a HIGH conflict of interest.



Professor D MUST notify NHMRC of this late conflict of interest by emailing his Secretariat with complete details of the conflict as soon as possible. When a late conflict of interest occurs, it is important that the peer reviewer destroy all documents relating to the application. This includes both hard and soft copies.

If you require any further information on the Disclosure of Interests process, refer to the scheme documentation or contact your NHMRC Secretariat.