

**Transdisciplinary Research on Energetics and Cancer (TREC)
Request for Applications (RFA) Preapplication
Conference Call**

Executive Summary

August 16, 2004

2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. Eastern Time

Moderator: Dr. Linda Nebeling, National Cancer Institute

Dr. Linda Nebeling, Acting Director of the Behavioral Research Program, National Cancer Institute (NCI), National Institutes of Health, chaired the TREC RFA Preapplication Conference Call. The call was conducted in a question-and-answer format, and the objective was to enable the extramural research community interested in applying for the RFA to pose questions to NCI staff as they begin the application process. NCI program staff in attendance for the call included: Dr. Robert Croyle, Ms. Crystal Wolfrey, Dr. Mary Jane Slesinski, Dr. Sharon Ross, Dr. John Milner, Dr. David Berrigan, Dr. Louis Masse, Dr. Virginia Hartmueller, Dr. Amy Yaroch, Dr. Shine Chang, Dr. Audie Atienza, and Dr. Rachel Ballard-Barbash. There were more than 130 participants listening in on the call.

PowerPoint presentations are available that summarize the TREC concept and describe the grant review process in great detail. Dr. Slesinski, Scientific Review Administrator, provided a brief overview of the review process. She stressed the impartiality of the review and recommended that applicants review the RFA carefully and check all of the links. Dr. Slesinski emphasized that the applications are due by November 16, 2004, and that appendices will not be accepted at the present time (applicants will be notified and given a mailing address to which they should send additional materials, such as color illustrations, later in the process).

Dr. Slesinski stated that the reviewers will be looking for “buzz words” mentioned in the RFA (e.g., transdisciplinary, synergy, and integration). There are special review criteria in addition to the standard criteria—significance, approach, innovation, investigator, and environment—that the applicants should address. For example, does the training and outreach plan include minorities, women, and children? The review panel will include experienced scientists within and outside of the cancer field and energetics in addition to well-trained consumer advocates who will examine protections and other human subject issues.

Dr. Nebeling discussed the areas of the TREC conceptual model that should be covered by each Center. A Center should address at least three of the four goals listed in the RFA (both basic and population science initiatives), and the problem should be approached from the conceptual framework. For example, although a Center’s emphasis may be basic science, commensurate with the team being assembled, there should be some interplay with a population scientist. The Center should not focus exclusively on basic operations or population science research.

Question-and-Answer Session on the Focus and Framing of Thematic Conceptual Research

- Dr. Nathan Barger stated that the RFA appears to suggest that applicants have **either** a mechanism focus **or** a prevention focus. Although the difference between mechanism and prevention is clear, does examining a mechanism in populations meet the RFA's prevention and control goal or is a population-based intervention required?

Dr. Croyle responded that reviewers will assess the transdisciplinary nature of the Center, ensuring that applicants integrate various disciplines relevant to their research theme (i.e., methodological and conceptual multidisciplinary integration). The TREC initiative funds projects not currently covered under the R01 and P01 portfolio; projects that cut across levels of analysis and disciplines. Although one Center cannot address all of the areas in the RFA, the review panel's overall score will reflect the degree to which the Center is integrated, thematic, and transdisciplinary. The RFA bridges a variety of mechanisms (e.g., behavior change mechanisms, cancer etiological mechanisms, mechanisms of interactions between exposures) and potential interventions. Mechanistic studies are not limited to molecular analyses. Thus, cross-cutting, integrative research—not an intervention study—is a requirement of the TREC.

Applicants have a tendency to limit the project to their current group, discipline, or level of analysis. The goal of the TREC is to challenge applicants to convince a multidisciplinary review panel that the full compliment of relevant expertise is available to address the project's thematic focus and research questions. Thus, the project should be both thematic and generally responsive to the RFA.

- Dr. Marty Slattery asked NCI staff to clarify the requirement for interdisciplinary training. Dr. Nebeling replied that the interdisciplinary component can include predoctoral, postdoctoral, junior investigator, and change-in-career investigator training. Dr. Croyle added that the requirement is flexible to account for the fact that current training mechanisms and funding at the application sites vary widely; however, the emphasis should be on training that is interdisciplinary and integrative.
- Dr. Anne McTiernan asked if it acceptable to use a preexisting resource (e.g., a study in which the primary data collection is complete, but some samples could be investigated further). Dr. Nebeling replied that this would be acceptable. Dr. Slesinski added that the applicant should be very clear about what research already has been done and how the project will proceed from that point.
- Dr. McTiernan asked if a Center should focus on obesity, physical activity, nutrition, or a combination of those areas. Dr. Croyle responded that the applicant must show that the appropriate variables and methodological approach are being used to address the research question, and these will vary with the area of focus (obesity, physical activity, diet) given the differences in each area's state-of-the science and level of evidence. Dr. Ballard-Barbash added that it will be difficult and costly for a project to be strong in all three areas (nutrition, physical activity, and obesity); however, a stronger proposal will be integrative and include aspects of all three at differing levels of detail.

- Dr. Barger asked NCI staff to clarify developmental projects such as “common methodology-based research” and “cross site methodology-based projects” and whether a dollar amount should be specified for such developmental work. Dr. Nebeling replied that developmental projects are adjunct projects identified collaboratively after the Centers have been established. Of the \$1.5 million in funding, \$250,000 can be used for developmental projects designed to investigate common data sharing, common measures, common methodological techniques, and so on. Dr. Ballard-Barbash added that not all five Centers necessarily would participate in such basic science projects. Dr. Croyle stated that in the past, the developmental funds have served as a vehicle for Centers to collaborate and investigate common interests.

Dr. James Herbert asked if a detailed description of the developmental project methodology is needed at the present time and if the funds could be used for new investigator support. Dr. Nebeling replied that only a brief list of primary ideas for the first 1-2 years of the development project is needed and that a project may not last the entire 5-year period. In addition, new investigator support is an appropriate use of developmental funds. Dr. Croyle added that the review panel will assess whether the developmental project element of the application interacts with the other elements in a coherent way, ensuring consistency of focus and mission.

- Dr. Sandy Markowitz asked if the 2-page summary that describes how each research project integrates with the goals of the TREC Center as a whole is part of the 25-page proposal limit. Dr. Nebeling replied that each 2-page summary is included in the 25 pages and speaks to the importance of creating an integrative effort. Dr. Barger asked if it is acceptable for a core facility to service only one research project. Dr. Croyle replied that this is an acceptable practice. Although a core facility typically is considered a shared resource, the valuation of the merit and budget justification for a project is left to the review panel’s discretion.

Question-and-Answer Session on Budget

- Dr. Nebeling stated that although there is a \$1.5 million cap on direct costs, no limit exists on indirect costs. For budgeting purposes, total cost is estimated to be \$2.5 million per Center. A program prioritization issue could arise if indirect costs are higher than anticipated, and the NCI may decide to fund four rather than five Centers. There are no finite directions regarding how funding is allocated across the projects or cores; however, experienced researchers will be evaluating the budget’s validity.
- Dr. Barger asked about a situation in which two successive projects are conducted in the 5-year period, for example, a 2-year project followed by a 3-year project. Should the application include a description of the 3-year project, given the fact that the initial findings may change the 3-year project’s focus and direction? Dr. Croyle responded that unless the project is slated for developmental funding, the study review must document how the \$1.5 million will be spent during the entire 5-year period. The focus of the 3-year project can be renegotiated, however, based on preemptive scientific findings.

- Dr. Zora Djuric asked about NCI's influence on the direction of the research projects after the award has been granted. Dr. Croyle responded that this is a U mechanism rather than a P50 mechanism because of the Coordination Center, which facilitates collaboration among the Centers with the funds set aside for such joint work. Although NCI program staff will attend investigator meetings and provide feedback, the Coordination Center is the vehicle used to facilitate collaborative projects. Dr. Nebeling added that collaboration also is encouraged between the Centers and content experts from the NCI, providing an additional resource.
- Dr. Nebeling discussed several differences between the evaluation of the individual Centers and the evaluation of the TREC initiative as a whole. The Coordination Center manages the evaluation of the overall TREC concept, whereas the evaluation of the individual Center is incorporated in the Center's budget.
- Dr. Lindsay Allen asked about coordination between applications for the Studies of Energy Balance and Cancer in Humans Program Announcement (PA) and for the TREC Centers. An NCI staff member responded that the concept is for those funded under the TREC and under the PA to attend meetings together, learn from one another, and coordinate some of their research.
- Dr. Nebeling stated that despite the breadth of content expertise required for a TREC Center, a codirector assignment is not possible. Each Center should have one Principal Investigator (PI) who acts as the central administrator and contact person for the NCI. A seven-member steering committee can be established with any number of coinvestigators managing the different content areas.

It is feasible for one institution to submit an application in response to the TREC Research Center RFA as well as the TREC Coordination Center RFA. The RFAs, which were written in tandem, were designed to be complimentary and will be evaluated by the same review panel. A point was made that although two applications may be received from the same institution, assigning different PIs to the Research Center and Coordination Center may better facilitate the overall TREC concept.

Drs. Nebeling and Slesinski encouraged the applicants to continue to solicit NCI program staff with any inquires that arise during the application process. Dr. Nebeling thanked NCI program staff and the applicants for their participation and concluded the conference call.

*Prepared by:
The Scientific Consulting Group, Inc. (SCG)
August 24, 2004*