

Submission by the Endocrine Society to the NIH Request For Information on Promoting Equity in Global Health Research

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This response was prepared under the guidance of the Endocrine Society's Research Affairs Core Committee with input from the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion and other invited member experts.

The Endocrine Society appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Request for Information (RFI) on Promoting Equity in Global Health Research. Founded in 1916, the Endocrine Society is the world's oldest, largest, and most active organization of scientists and healthcare professionals dedicated to research on hormones and the clinical treatment of patients with endocrine diseases. Our membership includes 18,000 clinicians and scientists from over 120 countries, including many researchers engaged in international research collaborations. In our comments, we share several recommendations to promote greater equity in global health research, particularly research that engages scientists in low and middle-income countries (LMICs).

NIH Must Acknowledge Local Needs and Cultures

Successful research programs will require establishing long-lasting relationships that are built on trust. Crucial to this will be an understanding of the culture of research partners and the communities they live and work in, as well as an appreciation of cultural differences that may exist among the various stakeholders involved in the research project. Research proposals should not only consider how they will be received by international partners and communities, but they must also reflect on how cultural differences impact researchers travelling to other regions. Religion, gender, race, and other identities need to be acknowledged in the context of cultural understanding and community health. Research teams need to be able to demonstrate in their grant applications that they have the cultural competency needed to effectively establish effective relationships where they will work.

To ensure that country and regional considerations are addressed in the context of global health research grants NIH should:

- Establish mechanisms for potential international partners to share their needs and interests with NIH so that this information can drive key questions and guide research applications.
- Mandate that grant applications for international research projects include a section on cultural competency explaining whether cultural differences exist, how they are



relevant to the research project, and how they will be addressed. We strongly recommend that this be a scorable section on the application.

Equitable Research Requires Sustained Engagement

Equity in global health research requires sustainable commitment to partnerships beyond single projects. Our members report that inequities can persist when projects end without an impact or benefit that persists beyond the timeframe of the project.

To develop sustainable programs that improve research equity, we recommend that NIH:

- Develop exchange programs that enable scientists to build capacity in their home countries. Programs with dual-mentorship encompassing both the host country and a US-based investigator would help ensure that the projects are relevant locally and sustainable.
- Invest in web-based resources to enable partnership in the absence of in-person engagement. Such resources could include databases of researchers and techniques or social media tools like Researchgate, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Slack.
- Reduce administrative barriers to international collaborations, such as limitations on K-awards and fellowships, or budgetary constraints that prevent travel or purchasing of laptops and other equipment.
- Provide support for administrative staff to assist in managing post-award details such as international IRBs, wire transfers, and ensuring safety during travel.

NIH Should Improve Access to Resources

Specific health needs and research interests will vary between different countries or regions; ‘a one size fits all’ approach will not be the most effective way to address global health disparities. In some cases, existing data-rich resources could benefit global biomedical researchers through better accessibility; however, enabling accessibility will require funds to maintain local resources as well as support for travel and training to more effectively utilize web-based resources in other countries. We note that supporting databases and other resources in LMICs can have global benefits with additional data on rare diseases or insights from different environmental exposures.

To facilitate equitable access to resources, NIH should:

- Conduct assessments to identify country- or region-specific research needs, including information on data access and capacity to utilize databases and other resources for basic and clinical research.



- Support the cost of developing, maintaining, and accessing databases in LMICs.
- Enable database access for researchers in LMICs, in particular for databases that may be underutilized. Support for training, including travel when necessary, could enable researchers to interact directly with the key research teams and points of contact for these databases, or to learn necessary coding skills for specific databases.
- Consider the feasibility of programs that would allow permanent international research teams, comparable to the Medical Research Council units in The Gambia and Uganda.
- Provide translation assistance/resources for those that aren't writing in their native language

Peer Review Processes Should Support International Collaborations

Our members report that biases may exist in the peer-review process that discourage international partnership on grants. Reviewers may not appreciate the value of an international collaboration and assume that local expertise is available and sufficient.

To ensure that the peer review system is able to facilitate NIH's global research equity goals, NIH should:

- Establish a dedicated study section including researchers and other stakeholders who understand NIH's goals and priorities. For example, this could include social workers as members of the review panel to assess the cultural competency of the applicants.
- Provide education for study section members on the goals of the program, including the scorable components for international research grants such as cultural competency and how these relate to NIH priorities.

In conclusion, we note that international scientific societies such as the Endocrine Society can be an effective partner in advancing global research equity objectives. Society products such as journals and meeting recordings are valuable resources of global biomedical relevance and we have found that translations and other features can increase accessibility to research and educational resources. If we can be of further assistance, please contact Alyssa Scott, PhD, at ascott@endocrine.org.