

E-Rare Call for Proposals 2009 for "European Research Projects on Rare Diseases"

1. Motivation

There are at least 6000 to 7000 distinct rare diseases, the great majority being of genetic origin. Although individually rare, taken together rare diseases affect at least 20 million people in Europe. Moreover, they represent a major issue in health care: a large number of these diseases lead to a significant decrease of life expectancy and most of them cause chronic illnesses with a large impact on quality of life and the health care system.

Therefore, further research on rare diseases is seriously needed to provide knowledge for prevention, diagnosis and better care of patients. But research is hampered by lack of resources at several levels. (1) Few scientists work on one specific disease. (2) There are few patients scattered over a large geographic area, causing difficulties to gather the necessary cohorts. (3) Existing databases and material collections are usually local, small, and not accessible or standardised. (4) Diseases often have complex clinical phenotypes and require interdisciplinary approaches to treatment and interdisciplinary cooperation for research.

Due to the small number of patients affected by single specific disease and to fragmentation of research, rare diseases are a prime example of a research area that could strongly benefit from coordination on a transnational scale.

In this context, the ERA-Net for research programmes on rare diseases (E-Rare) has been established to coordinate the research efforts of European countries in the field of rare diseases. The ERA-Net is coordinated by GIS-Institute for Rare Diseases (France) with the participation of The National Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS, Belgium), The National Research Agency (ANR, France), The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF, Germany), The PT-DLR Project Management Agency (Germany), The National Institute of Health (ISS, Italy), The Chief Scientist Office of the Ministry of Health (CSMOH, Israel), The Institute of Health Carlos III (ISCIII) – Fund for Health Research (FIS) / Institute for Research on Rare Diseases (IIER) (Spain), The Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw, The Netherlands), The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK, Turkey).

The following parties,

- The National Research Agency (ANR), France
- The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), Germany
- The Chief Scientist Office of the Ministry of Health (CSMOH), Israel
- The Institute of Health Carlos III (ISCIII), Spain
- The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK), Turkey
- The Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw), The Netherlands
- The Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), Portugal
- The National Institute of Health (ISS), Italy
- The Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Austria
- The Ministry of Development - General Secretariat for Research and Technology (GSRT), Greece

have decided to open the second joint call for funding multilateral research projects on rare diseases. The call is being opened simultaneously by the partners in their respective countries.

2. Aim of the call

The aim of the call is to enable scientists in different countries to build an effective collaboration on a common interdisciplinary research project based on complementarities and sharing of expertise, which takes into account the importance of a translational research approach. Projects shall involve a group of rare diseases or a single rare disease following the European definition i.e. a disease affecting not more than five in 10.000 persons in the European Community. Rare infectious diseases, rare cancers and rare adverse drug events in treatments of common diseases are excluded from the scope of this call.

Transnational research proposals must cover at least one of the following areas, that are equal in relevance for this call:

a) Collaborative research using or constituting cohorts/case series of patients/families and corresponding collections of biological material that would generally not be possible at a national scale. This research must have clear potential for clinical application and well defined scientific objectives e.g.:

- Definition of new nosological entities, epidemiological studies, genotype/phenotype correlations.
- Characterisation of the genetic/molecular basis of specific diseases.

b) Basic research on rare diseases including genetic and pathophysiological studies, using innovative and shared resources, technologies and expertises. The clinical relevance of this research must be clearly demonstrated.

c) Research on diagnosis and therapies for rare diseases. This may include identification and characterisation of biological targets, development of innovative screening systems and diagnostic tools, generation of relevant cellular and/or animal models and preclinical studies on gene or cell therapies.

d) Patient oriented research in the area of social and human sciences - e.g. psychological, psychosocial and behavioural research – as well as health services research and health economy research in the field of rare disorders.

Interventional clinical trials are excluded from the scope of the call.

Project proposals must clearly demonstrate the potential health impact as well as the added-value of transnational collaboration: gathering a critical mass of patients/biological material, sharing of resources (models, registries, diagnosis etc.), harmonization of data, sharing of specific know-how and/or innovative technologies.

3. Application

3.1 Funding recipients

Joint research proposals may be submitted by research groups working in universities (or other higher education institutions), non-university public research institutes, hospitals, as well as commercial companies, in particular small and medium-size enterprises, according to relevant national funding agencies' regulations for research funding. Please note that the inclusion of a non-eligible partner in a proposal leads to the rejection of the entire proposal without further review (for a definition of eligible partners see "Information for applicants" and national regulations).

Only transnational projects will be funded. Each proposal must involve a **minimum of two research groups** from two different participating partner countries, but must **not have more than six research groups** overall.

The number of participants and their research contribution should be appropriate for the aims of the transnational research project and reasonably balanced in terms of national participation. The latter means that there must **not be more than three research groups from one country** in one project proposal. Each transnational collaborative project should represent the critical mass to achieve ambitious scientific goals and should clearly demonstrate an added value from working together.

As the designated amount of funding for research groups from **Israel** is very limited and only sufficient for one or two research projects, the research groups from Israel are strongly advised to contact their national administration for further information.

Special attention will be given to the quality of patient's recruitment, biometric/statistical methods, phenotyping and collection of biological resources with regards to the objectives of the transnational project. For linkage analysis, sufficient genealogical information should be given in the application.

Each transnational project must nominate a project coordinator, who represents the consortium externally and is responsible for its internal management (such as controlling, reporting, intellectual property rights (IPR) issues and contact with the JTC 2009 secretariat). Within a joint proposal, each group leader will be the contact person for the relevant national funding agency/organization.

Research groups from non-partner countries may participate in transnational projects if they secure their own funding. They have to state clearly in the proposal if these funds are already secured or how they plan to

secure these funds until the project start. If the contribution of the third party is considered essential for the success of the entire proposal, the third party will be required to document the availability of their funds before October 1, 2009.

Whilst applications will be submitted jointly by groups from several countries, individual groups will be funded by the individual E-Rare funding organisation respective of the country from which applicants have applied. The applications are therefore subject to eligibility criteria of individual funding organisations. Therefore, applicants are strongly advised to contact their national representative and confirm eligibility with their respective funding organisations in advance of submitting an application.

3.2 Financial and legal modalities

Funding is granted for a maximum of three years according to national regulations. Eligible costs may vary according to the corresponding national funding agency regulations. Each group is subject to the rules and regulations of their respective national funding agency.

3.3 Submission of joint proposals

Joint proposals (in English) must be received by the Joint Call Secretariat in an electronic version **no later than 5 February 2009 at 10 a.m. GMT (Berlin, 11 a.m. German winter time)** and in a signed paper version **(1 original + 2 copies) no later than 12 February 2009**. Paper copies should be sent by **certified post with recorded delivery**. Further information on how to submit proposals electronically will be made available through the E-Rare website. The forms that have to be used for submission of proposal are available on the E-Rare website. For proposals including Spanish research groups, in addition to this forms the Spanish part has to be submitted concurrently to the Spanish funding agency (for details, see the Spanish national call text).

For details concerning the necessary information required for submission of the proposals see "Guidelines for applicants".

3.4 Further information

If you need additional information, please contact the Joint Call Secretariat, or your national funding agency representative (see "Information for applicants" or www.e-rare.eu).

4. Evaluation

The evaluation of the joint transnational project proposals will be organised as follows:

Formal check of proposals: The Joint Call Secretariat, together with the national partners, will assess all proposals to ensure that they meet the call's formal criteria (date of submission; number of participating countries; inclusion of all necessary information in English; appropriate limits on length) and that applicants

are eligible to submit applications according to national rules. Please note that if a proposal includes one non-eligible partner the whole proposal will be rejected (for a definition of eligible partners see "Information for applicants" and national regulations). Proposals not meeting the formal criteria will be declined without further review.

Peer-review of proposals: The Scientific Evaluation Committee will carry out a scientific evaluation based on international scientific expertises using specific evaluation criteria (see below) and a common *Evaluation Form*. A scoring system from 0 to 5 will be used to evaluate the proposal's performance with respect to the different evaluation criteria.

Scoring system:

0: fails or missing/incomplete information; 1: poor; 2: fair; 3: good; 4: very good; 5: excellent

Evaluation criteria:

1. Scientific quality of the proposal (innovative potential, adequate methodology)
2. Feasibility of the transnational project (adequate budget, resources, time schedule)
3. International competitiveness of participating research groups in the field(s) of the proposal (previous work in the field, expertise of the research groups)
4. Level of collaborative interaction between the research groups and added value of the transnational consortium
5. Impact of the expected results for future clinical and other health relevant applications

Evaluation will be carried out in two steps: 1) selection of proposals for external review by the Scientific Evaluation Committee and 2) discussion of external reviews and final funding recommendations by establishing a ranking list of the best proposals.

Final decision on funding: Based on the ranking list, the Call Steering Committee will suggest the transnational projects to be funded. Based on these recommendations, final decisions will be made by the national funding agencies. The funding decisions are expected to be communicated to the project coordinators in November 2009.

Before a transnational project may start, it is recommended that all research groups sign a Cooperation Agreement (addressing the issues given in *Information for Applicants on cooperation agreements*, which will be made available on E-Rare's website). On request, the Cooperation Agreement must be made available to the national funding agency, together with any other information required by national regulations.

5. Reporting requirements

Each project coordinator, on behalf of all participating teams, should submit to the Joint Call Secretariat a brief annual scientific progress report of the transnational project (in English). In addition, each team will have to report to its funding Party, in accordance with the respective national funding agency's regulations.