Executive Summary

Changes to the main NIH grant application that have been in effect since January 25, 2010 — shortening the form considerably and changing somewhat its emphasis — have now undergone a full cycle of submissions by principal investigators and reviews by government reviewers.

Karin D. Rodland, PhD, member of the Oregon Cancer Institute and a collaborating scientist at the Oregon Regional Primate Research Center, says she hasn't seen any problems at the review level. She emphasizes that "current NIH policy for review of the short forms, at least during this transitional period, is that submitters should not be penalized at the score level for failure to comply with the new requirements for the Biosketch and Resource pages." However, "non-compliance should be noted in the Other Comments section of the review."

Rodland reports that the NIH "wants to know if applicants are using sections outside the page limits — e.g., Human Subjects, Vertebrate Animals, Data & Resource Sharing — to circumvent the page limits by moving experimental details to those sections." It's always best, she says, to use the form in the way it was designed: as a shorter, more streamlined application process that's focused on two key issues:

1. Will the research you're proposing result in a clinically relevant product or a game-changing shift in your area of research?

2. Are you the best researcher to make that happen?

A good way to test whether your application answers those questions adequately, Rodland says, is to use the "elevator speech" as a template for the all-important first page of the new form, where you detail your specific aims.

Imagine you're in an elevator with Bill Gates, and he has a billion dollars he wants to invest in research. Even if you're going from the penthouse to the parking garage, you have about three minutes to convince him that what you want to do needs to be done — and that you can do it. That's because most reviewers essentially make up their minds about the fundability of your proposal as they read the first page. Then they read the rest of the application looking for support for that original impression.

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Principal Investigators Association has partnered with Dr. Karin Rodland to bring you this useful reference to help you through the NIH grant proposal maze.

Dr. Rodland has competed successfully for NIH grants for over 25 years and has been an NIH reviewer since 1998. Dr. Rodland's professional experience includes over ten years as a chief scientist for biomedical research at a non-profit research institute and 17 years as a faculty member at Oregon Health Sciences University.

Using her experience, Dr. Rodland explains what you should and should not do in your NIH grant proposal application.

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