

Not Real Funding?

Sir—I was very interested to read Dr Albert van Jaarsveld's letter on the 'Trajectory of NRF Funding' in your May/June issue, for a number of reasons. First, I was eager to see what the NRF had to say regarding the correspondence that has recently appeared in the pages of the *SAJS*—and especially what the official response would be to the very serious points raised by your leader (*SAJS* 105, 2; 2009) and Professors Illing and Gibbons' letter (*SAJS* 105, 10; 2009).

Second, I was curious to see just how the NRF could explain its apparent failure as our premier science funding agency to actually fund science in a meaningful way.

I was disappointed on both counts. Dr van Jaarsveld signally failed to address the 'Blue Skies' issue, where new applicants to the programme were not informed that only novel research proposals—that is, not building on previous work (itself a nonsensical idea)—would be considered; and proposals that were considered were not subject to external review. He also failed to give any explanation of how the NRF could allow itself to be caught in the trap of not having any money to fund new 'Blue Skies' proposals, while honouring old commitments.

Anyone familiar with the old FRD talk discussion group on the Web will know I have had a great deal to say on similar issues in the past: a similar paroxysmal

organizational reset in and around 2001 resulted in my funding getting cut tenfold—despite excellent progress. I wrote at the time—although the *SAJS* refused to publish it—the following:

I leapt to my trusty friend, my Netscape Messenger, and raced off indignant letters into the ether. I phoned colleagues in Pretoria, in Stellenbosch, I talked to people down the corridor. An interesting picture emerged, over several days, and from all over the country. People who I consider to be leaders in their fields have had their research awards slashed; people who I know to be good researchers have received no money at all. Other people, on the other hand, have had no complaints: however, the overall picture seems to be of bewildered researchers wondering what they had done wrong, and high-up people in university faculties scrambling to demand explanations of the NRF.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose ...
Does no-one except us poor researchers learn from these experiences. There are real consequences to this crisis: one of the most important is that good programmes which train students are being terminated, with all of the knock-on effects that this implies, such as alienation from research for students who get cut loose, and unfunded researchers simply abandoning the NRF and basic science. As it is, I survived the 2001 crunch by switching fields and funding bodies: I shifted my focus to mainly medical-related applied research, and discovered—as many had before me—that you could get a *lot* more money by so doing.

As for refereeing, I was wryly amused to read the following in Dr van Jaarsveld's letter:

We intend to open our peer review processes to public and stakeholder scrutiny. As peer review and transparent and accountable decision-making are key principles of the NRF, it is important to ensure that our peer review processes are benchmarked against the best international practices. It is intended that this process will be completed by the end of 2009.

Right—so the peer review processes have *not* been either transparent, or up to international standards in the past then? As an example, if I pool all of the referees' comments I have received from the FRD/NRF since 1985 on all of the project proposals *and* personal reviews I have been subjected to, I doubt I could fill three A4 pages—in Arial 14 pt double-spaced. I have also had occasion to seriously doubt—in correspondence with the FRD/NRF—both the competence and relevance to my work of people who have reviewed my projects. I found, after repeated questioning of the person responsible, that very few projects were ever sent out to overseas reviewers, despite this supposedly being a major feature of the FRD/NRF's peer review process.

I note that a July 17th article in the *Mail & Guardian* online (<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-07-17-research-put-on-hold-to-fund-world-cup>) claimed that

The [NRF] recently canned a joint project involving researchers from South Africa and Spain, citing a diversion of public funds to preparations for the 2010 World Cup and the global economic crisis as the primary reasons for cancellation...'

Let's hope there is a long and lasting economic benefit to SA from the 2010 World Cup—because there may well be a long and lasting research deficit to offset.

Sincerely,

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