

Investigator Initiated Clinical Trials (IICTs): call for proposals 2019

1. Aim and scope

The special programme for Investigator Initiated Clinical Trials (IICTs) of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) supports clinical trials as defined in the Federal Act on Research involving Human Beings (Human Research Act, HRA)* and regulated by the Ordinance on Clinical Trials in Human Research (Clinical Trials Ordinance, ClinO)**. These trials address a documented unmet medical need and are of value to the patients but not in industry focus.

Excluded from support through IICT programme are

- Non-randomized and uncontrolled studies
 - Pilot studies, proof of concept studies
 - Animal studies, preclinical studies
 - Studies with safety endpoints only
 - Observational studies
 - Physiological, pathophysiological studies and technology developments without prospective allocation to a health-related intervention
 - Studies involving healthy subjects
- Studies conducted for direct commercial purposes

* Clinical trial means a research project in which persons are prospectively assigned to a health-related intervention** in order to investigate its effects on health or on the structure and function of the human body. **Source:** Art. 3 letter l HRA

** Health-related intervention means a preventive, diagnostic, therapeutic, palliative or rehabilitative measure investigated in a clinical trial. **Source:** Article 2 letter a ClinO

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2. Key information about the call

2.1 Budget

The SNSF has a budget of CHF 10 million for the call. The aim is to fund at least four studies.

2.2 Deadlines

Researchers wishing to participate must send the SNSF a 'letter of intent' by **e-mail until 5 p.m.** Swiss local time on **1 July 2019** (for details see: 6.3 Formal requirements, item a).

The deadline for the submission of applications via *mySNF* is **1 November 2019 at 5 p.m** Swiss local time.

The SNSF checks each submitted application to verify whether the formal requirements are met. If there is an error in the application that can be easily rectified, the SNSF will set a deadline for this in an e-mail to you. In order to make corrections within this deadline, you must be contactable by e-mail for two weeks after the submission deadline for the relevant funding scheme.

2.3 Announcement of funding decisions

The funding decisions for the IICT Call 2018 will be communicated at the end of May 2020.

3. Background

Since 2015, the IICT programme has been offering targeted support for independent, comprehensive, clinical studies with the aim of meeting major scientific and societal needs. The studies go beyond the scope of project funding in terms of their research questions, comprehensive nature, duration, complexity and costs. They generally require a multicentric setting and, sometimes, international collaboration. There is one call each year, up to and including 2020.

The IICT programme has generated a great deal of interest among researchers. In the first four calls, the SNSF received 75, 35, 32 and 18 applications respectively. From the first three calls, 20 proposals that were deemed to be outstanding or excellent are currently funded by the SNSF. This corresponds to a success rate of 12% to 20% per call. The funded projects will last for 3 to 5 years and will involve over 8300 patients. Approximately 140 clinical trial centres are taking part in the funded trials. All Swiss university hospitals, over 20 cantonal hospitals and other institutions in Switzerland, and 22 hospitals abroad are participating.

The evaluation results also show that, in addition to factors such as the high clinical relevance of the research questions, a convincing impact hypothesis and a good study design, a reliable calculation of patient numbers and evidence regarding feasibility are key success factors for obtaining IICT funding. Experience has shown that the preparation time needed for clinical studies until the start of patient recruitment is often underestimated. Sound planning requires a major effort from the principal investigator and good organisational structures. It is therefore highly recommended to appoint a study manager and to tap into the resources of local Clinical Trial Units *CTUs*.

SNSF has since 2004 through several initiatives contributed significantly to the establishment and enhancement of clinical research in Switzerland in line with international standards:

- Set up of Clinical Trial Units at all university hospitals as well as at Kantonsspital St. Gallen, brought together under a new umbrella organisation, the Swiss Clinical Trial Organisation *SCTO*
- Support of longitudinal studies
- Specific grants for young clinical researchers in translational medicine (Special Programme University Medicine *SPUM*)
- Adaptation of funding schemes more closely into line with the needs of physicians (for example: Protected Research Time for Clinicians *PRTC*)
- Creation of the Swiss Biobanking Platform *SBP*
- Introduction of the special programme IICT

4. Legal framework

The call for this research programme is issued in accordance with the Funding Regulations of the SNSF (Art. 5 in conjunction with Art. 48). The call document sets out the specific requirements for the awarding of grants, details of the application process, and the rights and obligations of grantees. Unless the document provides otherwise, the provisions of the Funding Regulations of the SNSF and its Implementation Regulations apply.

5. Programme-specific requirements

5.1 Setting

The studies should be multicentric and should generally involve more than two centres. In special cases, a study may involve only one or two centres, provided the applicants can show that the trial cannot be carried out successfully as a multicentric project. The trials must be initiated in Switzerland. No funding shall be awarded for ongoing clinical trials for which patients are already being recruited.

It is advisable to involve experts of the Clinical Trial Units or similar institutions at an early stage to develop the study protocol and ensure the quality of data collection.

5.2 Duration of funding

The funding period is limited to 60 months, divided into a preparation phase of no more than 12 months (finalising the study protocol, obtaining the authorisations needed to conduct the project, organising data collection, registering the study, etc.) and a trial phase of no more than 48 months. The trial phase starts with the recruitment of subjects and ends once the data has been fully analysed.

5.3 Patient and public involvement

In the research plan, applicants must explain their efforts to involve patients and members of their family or the general public in the conception and planning of the project. If no patient or public involvement was possible, the reasons need to be outlined in the research plan.

5.4 Recruiting centres

Recruiting centres must confirm their participation in writing. These confirmations (letters of commitment) form part of the application to be submitted on the *mySNF* portal and consist of the following items:

- _Confirmation of participation in the trial (giving the title of the trial and PI's name)
- _Name and position of the person responsible for patient recruitment;
- _Number of patients that will be included in the trial at the centre;
- _Evidence for the feasibility of patient numbers, e.g. experiences made in previous studies, patient registers or retrospective case studies.

The letters of commitment must be written in English. The SNSF accepts PDFs sent as e-mail attachments if they include the information set out above.

5.5 Recruiting subjects abroad

Subjects should be recruited primarily in Switzerland. It is permissible to include subjects at foreign centres should this be necessary for reaching the sample size, provided the legal requirements are met.

6. Personal and formal requirements for the proposals and for their submission

6.1 Personal requirements

Natural persons are eligible to submit applications if they meet the general eligibility requirements for the submission of applications pursuant to Arts. 10 and 12 of the Funding Regulations, Arts. 4 and 5 of the Project Funding Regulations and if they form a research group pursuant to Art. 12 of the Funding Regulations.

The members of the research group must have an excellent scientific track record and the ability to lead a clinical trial involving various experts and institutions in a multicentric setting;

The research group consists of a maximum of 5 people. The members of the research group have clearly defined roles and responsibilities with regard to the implementation of the project as a whole.

The members of the research group appoint a corresponding applicant (Art. 12 para. 4 of the Funding Regulations); this person is generally the PI of the clinical trial.

6.2 Project partners

In contrast to the applicants, project partners are researchers who make a partial contribution to the project. They are generally responsible for individual phases or aspects of the study, but are not (remunerated) employees of the project. They are not PIs and are not responsible for implementing the trial as a whole, nor are they among those responsible for the entire project. In a clinical research context, project partners may be, for instance, researchers who contribute to the inclusion of patients in recruiting centres, but are not involved in the design or analysis of the study. All of the project partners must be mentioned in the application. Project partners may not refer to the support received from the SNSF as a grant they themselves have acquired. They provide specific services for the research project, for which they can be remunerated.

6.3 Formal requirements

- a. Applicants must announce their intention of submitting a proposal to the SNSF by sending a letter of intent to the e-mail address iict@snf.ch by 5 p.m. Swiss local time on 1 July 2019. A confirmation of receipt will be sent until 5 July 2019. The letter of intent contains a brief outline of the project. A template for the letter of intent is available on the SNSF website. Proposals for which no letter of intent was submitted in good time cannot be considered for evaluation. The letters of intent enable the SNSF to organise the forthcoming evaluation process. They are not used as a means of preselecting applications.
- b. The applications must be submitted in accordance with the requirements issued by the SNSF and must contain all the necessary data and documents;

- c. The research group submits a joint research plan. It is mandatory to use the IICT proposal template 2019. The template is available on the IICT website and on the *mySNF* platform.
- d. Applicants may submit only one application per IICT call.
- e. Researchers may not participate as grantees in more than one IICT project during the same funding period. However, they may contribute to multiple projects as project partners;
- f. Applications must be submitted to the SNSF electronically via the *mySNF* portal by 5 p.m. Swiss local time on 1 November 2019;
- g. Applications as well as all supporting documentation must be written in English.
- h. In all other respects, the formal requirements for the submission of applications apply, in particular those stipulated in the Funding Regulations and its Implementation Regulations.

7. Eligible costs/financing

7.1 Eligible costs

All costs that are mentioned in the General Implementation Regulations (Clause 2 Eligible costs) and in Art. 8 of the Project Funding Regulations may be charged to the IICT grant. They include, in particular:

- a. the salaries of scientific and technical staff in research projects according to the salary ranges and rates prescribed by the SNSF;
- b. material costs that are directly related to the research work, namely material of enduring value, expendable items, medicines, placebo, reagents, fees for the obtainment of official authorisations, travel costs or third-party charges;
- c. direct costs incurred through the use of research infrastructure linked to the research work;
- d. direct costs incurred at Clinical Trial Units or equivalent, in particular costs in connection with study set-up, monitoring, data collection and analysis;
- e. costs for the organisation of conferences and workshops in connection with the funded re-search;
- f. costs for national and international cooperation and networking activities carried out in connection with the funded research.

In the application, the costs must be set out in detail according to cost type.

The SNSF may approve transfers between the individual cost types during the funding period.

Costs for further projects resulting from the study are in general not covered by the IICT grant. The funding of such further projects may be separately applied for under the project funding scheme.

Patient recruitment costs at clinical trial centres abroad may be charged to the grant. However, payments to such project partners should in general not exceed 20% of the grant.

7.2 Donations from other institutions

Donations from commercially oriented institutions (e.g. supply of drugs or medical products at reduced rates or free of charge) are permissible if:

- a. applicants confirm that the relevant enterprises or institutions are not the sponsors of the trial;
- b. applicants are able to prove that the principles of research freedom, research independence and freedom to publish will be upheld;
- c. applicants confirm that the data collected in the research project belong to the applicants or to their employers;
- d. the type and amount of the donation is declared (e.g. supply of drugs or medical equipment for the trial free of charge or at a reduced rate);
- e. sponsors and owners of enterprises do not derive any direct pecuniary benefit from the SNSF-funded research work.

Contributions towards financing the project from non-commercial institutions are permissible, provided they are not subject to any conditions. The regulations and guidelines of the SNSF apply exclusively in this regard.

8. Evaluation and evaluation criteria

Proposals that meet the personal and formal requirements and that are not manifestly inadequate will be evaluated by an international panel of experts with certified experience of planning and conducting clinical trials.

At least three external reviews must be obtained per proposal, two from clinical experts in the field and one from a biostatistician. A steering board composed of members of the National Research Council will support the evaluation process in an advisory role.

Based on the recommendations of the international panel, the Biology and Medicine division of the National Research Council will make funding decisions and submit them to the Presiding Board of the National Research Council for endorsement.

8.1 Evaluation criteria

The main criteria considered in the scientific evaluation are:

- a. Unmet medical need, clinical relevance, scientific value and topicality of the study;
- b. Value to the patients and clinical practice in Switzerland;
- c. Originality of research objectives;
- d. Suitability of methodological approach;
- e. Feasibility of the project (incl. the financial planning, the organisation and management of the study and the patient recruitment plan);
- f. Involvement of patients and members of their family in the conception and execution of the trial;
- g. Scientific track record of the applicants;
- h. Applicants' expertise in relation to the project, particularly with regard to multicentric clinical studies.

9. Payment of the grant/rights and obligations of grantees

9.1 Transfer of funds

The grants are transferred in annual instalments.

The first instalment is paid by the SNSF at the request of the corresponding grantee after the grant is awarded.

Before any further instalments can be paid, the report on the predefined milestones (see section 9.5 on Reporting) will need to be approved by the SNSF.

9.2 Cost-neutral extension of project duration

In justified exceptional cases, the SNSF may, at the grantee's request, cost-neutrally extend the grant by a maximum of 12 months. The extension must be requested before the end of the funding period.

9.3 Compliance with national and international regulations and clinical research guidelines

Grantees must ensure that the study is conducted in accordance with the study protocol and that it takes into account the Helsinki Declaration, the ICH-GCP Guidelines and the applicable statutory and regulatory provisions.

In the event of collaboration with a project partner abroad, the above-mentioned requirements must be met also for the research work carried out abroad for the duration of the grant.

The SNSF is not regarded as the sponsor of the trial as defined in the Ordinance on Clinical Trials in Human Research (**Source:** *Article 2 letter c ClinO*).

9.4 Providing open access to research data (open research data)

A data management plan (DMP) is an integral part of the IICT research proposal. It is entered directly in *mySNF*. Applicants are expected to submit a DMP that is understandable, suits their project and meets the standards set by their research community. At this stage, the DMP is considered a draft and excluded from the scientific evaluation. The definitive DMP needs to be submitted by the end of the project at the latest.

Costs of providing open access to research data (Open Research Data) are chargeable to the IICT grant pursuant to the General implementation regulations for the Funding Regulations, Clause 2.13.

9.5 Reporting

Grantees are obliged to submit scientific and financial reports. In particular, after the start of the project the corresponding grantee must submit:

- a. on completion of the preparation phase, i.e. after 12 months at the latest, a report on attainment of the first milestones defined by the SNSF;
- b. on completion of the preparation phase, i.e. after 12 months at the latest, a financial report;
- c. every 6 months after the start of the trial period, a report on the pre-defined milestones;
- d. every 12 months after the start of the trial period, a financial report;

- e. a final report upon conclusion of the project;
- f. a final financial report upon conclusion of the project;
- g. a DMP in accordance with SNSF requirements by the end of the project at the latest.

9.6 Discontinuation of the grant

The SNSF may discontinue the grant for significant reasons, particularly if the defined milestones are not reached, the stated aims for the trial can no longer be achieved or the formal requirements no longer met. The SNSF conducts a hearing with those concerned before issuing its decision in the form of a ruling.