



RESEARCH GRANTS PROGRAM 2024-25

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (STAGE 1)

INFORMATION AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR APPLICANTS

Applications open:	1 October 2024
Applications close:	3 November 2024 5pm AEDT
Successful applicants will be notified and invited to submit full applications:	16 December 2025

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Section A: Information

Background

Macular Disease Foundation Australia (MDFA), a registered charity, is the only organisation in Australia dedicated to supporting and representing people with macular disease.

MDFA's mission is to reduce the impact of macular disease in Australia through our pillars of work:

- Support and care for people living with macular disease
- Community awareness and early detection
- Advocacy – being the voice of the community
- Research – growing the knowledge and evidence base to improve outcomes for people with macular disease.

Thanks to the generous support of the macular disease community through donations, gifts and bequests, MDFA is again offering grants for researchers with expertise in macular and retinal diseases to commence major projects in 2025.

MDFA Research Grants Program

Aims of MDFA's Research Grant Program

MDFA's Research Grant Program aims to:

- Support research projects that maximise outcomes that further MDFA's mission to reduce the impact of macular disease in our community.
- Establish MDFA as a centre of excellence and leader in the knowledge of available research involving macular disease related issues (globally) for the benefit of all our stakeholders.
- Assess the medical and social impacts of macular disease on the community.
- Fund research projects in an ethical, responsible and sustainable manner which is collaborative and engages with people impacted by or interested in the field of macular or retinal disease.

Whilst the Program does not fund research directly undertaken by medical or pharmaceutical companies, the research MDFA funds is not meant to exclude ancillary research into pharmaceutical treatments, or the investigation of potential treatments that may go on to be developed by a medical or pharmaceutical company.

Objectives of MDFA's Research Grants Program

The MDFA Research Grants Program's core objective is to deepen the understanding of the implications of living with macular disease and of the causes and management of macular and retinal diseases.

This is achieved via funding rigorous high-quality research that withstands professional and scientific scrutiny.

To ensure sustainability of the program, other objectives include funding:

- an appropriate spread of research across both medical and social impact-focused projects.
- an appropriate blend of high quality, rigorous short-term (1 year) and longer-term projects and initiatives (up to 3 years).
- projects or initiatives that can be leveraged, not just financially but also to enhance MDFA's brand and reputation, and broaden the level of awareness of, and interest in, macular disease and related issues.

Areas of research

MDFA recognises there is a critical need for macular and retinal disease research with the fundamental goal of reducing the burden on people living with a macular disease and on the health system.

MDFA funds research into all types of macular and retinal diseases, including studies that increase knowledge of risk factors, causes, detection methods, and potential treatments for macular diseases.

MDFA also funds projects with a biomedical, clinical, epidemiological, and/or psychosocial focus.

MDFA is seeking to fund high quality, high impact research within the following broad areas:

Bio-medical research: e.g. genetics, risk factors, incidence/prevalence data, treatment outcomes, early intervention and prevention, pathogenesis, epigenetics.

Low vision studies: e.g. accessibility and affordability of services and support, referral pathways, daily living, independence and psychological wellbeing, national guidelines and accreditation for the delivery of low vision services in Australia, evaluating and supporting early referral services and adherence/compliance with rehabilitation.

Practices and protocols: e.g. best practice for eye health professionals, diagnosis and referral pathways, models of care, optimising communication with people with macular disease, their family and carers.

MDFA's grant types

MDFA currently has two grant funding streams: MDFA's Research Grants, and the Grant Family Fund awards.

Macular Disease Foundation Research Grant

The MDFA Research Grant funds macular disease research projects up to \$200,000, over a total duration of 1-3 years.

All eligible applications will be assessed by MDFA's Research Grants Review Panel, made up of macular disease experts and researchers.

Based on the merits of submitted applications, and the available funds, MDFA may choose to award multiple research grants.

MDFA reserves the right to award grants of lower value than requested by the applicant pending revision of the research proposal and budget.

Grant Family Fund

The purpose of the Grant Family Fund is to encourage and enable innovative and creative research in the field of macular disease.

This stream of grant funding is available to early career researchers who have not held a substantial grant such as NHMRC or equivalent.

The Grant Family Fund seeks to challenge current paradigms and/or have a major impact on macular disease research through studies that creatively:

- develop or use novel research concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies or interventions
- propose a reinterpretation, refinement, improvement or new application of existing theoretical concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies or interventions, or
- integrate and adapt concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies or interventions from other research fields or disciplines for a new purpose or in a new way.

Early-career researchers can apply for up to \$50,000 for 'blue-sky' macular disease research projects up to 1 year duration, with the generous support of the Grant Family Fund.

All eligible applications will be assessed by MDFA's Research Grants Review Panel, made up of macular disease experts and researchers.

Based on the merits of submitted applications, and the available funds, MDFA may choose to award multiple research grants.

MDFA reserves the right to award grants of lower value than requested by the applicant pending revision of the research proposal and budget.

Eligibility for an MDFA grant

All proposed research projects, regardless of which grant type is being applied for, must meet strict eligibility standards in order to be assessed and ultimately, if successful, receive grant funding.

Researchers working in any field of research relevant to macular and retinal diseases are eligible to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) application for an MDFA grant, provided they meet the following criteria:

- The Primary Investigator:
 - must be an Australian citizen or Australian permanent resident at the time of submission.
 - must be based in Australia at an Australian institution. Co-Investigators may be based in overseas institutions but are not eligible to draw funds from the grant.
- Research applicants can only be named as the Primary Investigator on a single application for an MDFA Research Grant or Grant Family Fund award, but not both.
- Research institutions may submit more than one application.
- The administering institution must be registered as an Administering Institution with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and/or the Australian Research Council (ARC).
- The application must be complete and adhere to all eligibility criteria, instructions and guidelines including word limits and formatting.

If applicants are unsure of any eligibility requirements, please contact MDFA for clarification **prior to** submitting an application. Please email research@mdfoundation.com.au.

- If the applicant (or members of the investigator team) is in receipt of research grant funding from other sources or intends to submit grant applications to other funding entities for the same or similar research, this must be disclosed to MDFA at the time of application.

In the event funding is secured from another source, MDFA reserves the right to withdraw the application for funding.

How to apply for an MDFA grant

Stage 1: Submit an Expression of Interest application

Stage 1 Expression of Interest applications open on **1 October 2024** and close at **11pm on 3 November 2024**. Late applications will not be accepted.

Please note that in order to progress to Stage 2, an EOI application must be submitted to MDFA in Stage 1 and be successful in Stage 1.

Applicants are encouraged to contact MDFA to seek clarification on any questions relating to the application process prior to submitting an application.

1. Applicants must use the Expression of Interest application form available at: [Register an interest - Macular Disease Foundation Australia Macular Disease Foundation Australia \(mdfoundation.com.au\)](https://www.mdfoundation.com.au)
2. The application form must be completed in accordance with the instructions provided in Section B of this document. Applicants must adhere to the specified formatting guidelines as well as word and page limits.
3. Applications must be submitted as a **Word document** electronically via email to **research@mdfoundation.com.au**.

The total file size of the application and attachments should not exceed 5MB.

4. Electronic files should be named with the lead applicant's last name, followed by their first name, type of grant, and year of application. See examples below:

Macular Disease Foundation Research Grant (MDFARG): e.g.

Smith_John_MDFARG_EOI_2024

Grant Family Fund award (GFF): e.g. Smith_John_GFF_EOI_2024

5. Once submitted electronically, the application will be considered final, and no further changes will be accepted.
6. MDFA reserves the right to reject incomplete applications.
7. MDFA will email an acknowledgment of receipt of application within two working days. If acknowledgement of receipt is not received within five working days, the applicant should contact MDFA.
8. EOI applicants may be contacted for further information if any questions or clarifications are required by the Research Grants Panel.
9. Successful EOI applicants will be contacted directly in mid-December 2024 and invited to enter Stage 2 of the grant application process and submit a full grant application.
10. Unsuccessful applicants at Stage 1 will be notified in writing via email.

Please note that unsuccessful applicants will not receive feedback from the MDFA Grant Review Panel.

Stage 2: Submit a full research grant application

Applicants who are successful in Stage 1 (Expression of Interest) will be invited to enter Stage 2 of the application process and submit a full application for a Macular Disease Foundation Research Grant or a Grant Family Fund award, as applicable.

Expression of Interest application review process

All eligible Expression of Interest applications will be subject to scientific peer review by MDFA's Research Grants Panel, made up of macular disease experts and researchers

Successful EOI applicants will be invited to enter stage 2, and complete and submit a full grant application.

Applications undergoing Stage 2 will undergo rigorous full peer review by Australian and/or international experts.

Applications at Stage 2 will also be assessed by trained members of the macular disease community including people with macular disease, their family members, carers and others with lived experience of vision loss.

Final approval of MDFA Research Grant funding after Stage 2 rests with the MDFA Board upon recommendation by MDFA's Research Grants Review Panel.

Assessment criteria – Macular Disease Foundation Research Grant

Scientific quality of the research proposal (60% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following:

- The clarity, strength and relevance of the research hypotheses, research questions, aims and objectives.
- Is the project plan informed and supported by the existing literature/evidence-base?
- The strengths, weaknesses and appropriateness of the project's design to deliver on the aims of the research.
- The relevance and significance of the proposed outcomes and outcomes measures.
- The clarity and feasibility of the research plan.
- The appropriateness of the researchers and research environment to successfully support and deliver the research project.

Significance of proposed research (10% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following

- Potential of the likely outcomes or findings of this research to increase knowledge about macular or retinal disease.
- Potential of the outcomes or findings to contribute to MDFA's objectives of reducing the impact of the macular disease, or related issue, being investigated.
- Potential for this research to be extended into further research projects or translated into clinical and/or public health practice or policy.
- Alignment with the research areas identified by MDFA.
- The likely interest from other researchers, conference organisers, journals, community groups, and policy makers in the outcomes of this research.

Innovation of proposed research (10% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following questions:

- Is the proposed research new/novel or creative??
- Are the techniques cutting edge?
- Will the research contribute to and inform current knowledge, or transform practices or approaches, and other researchers within this field of research?
- How well does the proposal describe the new ideas, procedures, technologies, programs or health policy settings?

Applicant's capability, relative to opportunity (10% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following:

- Evidence that the investigator/s have the appropriate research skills and experience to successfully deliver the proposed project and achieve the aims of the research.
- The national and international standing of the applicant(s) based upon their research achievements, including but not limited to:
 - Research outputs relevant to the proposed field of research (e.g. publications, impact or outcome of previous research achievements etc)
 - Contribution to their research field (e.g. invitations to speak at professional/research meetings, editorial appointments, relevant committee appoints etc)
 - Other research-related achievements (e.g. influence on clinical/health policy or practice or provision of influential advice to health authorities and government, impacts on health via broad dissemination of research outcomes e.g. via mainstream media, the community or industry involvement)
 - Mentoring environment to support early/emerging researchers.

Track records will be assessed on the most recent five years, except where there is a career disruption, and considered relative to opportunity.

Consumer involvement (10% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following aspects:

- How the macular disease community have been either considered or consulted with in the design of the research project.
- How consumers will be involved throughout the project.
Note: we expect the level of consumer involvement to vary depending on the nature of the research.

Assessment criteria – Grant Family Fund awards

Scientific quality of the research proposal (35%)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following:

- The clarity, strength and relevance of the research hypotheses, research questions, aims and objectives.
- Is the project plan informed and supported by the existing literature/evidence-base?
- The strengths, weaknesses and appropriateness of the project's design to deliver on the aims of the research.
- The relevance and significance of the proposed outcomes and outcomes measures.
- The clarity and feasibility of the research plan.
- The appropriateness of the researchers and research environment to successfully support and deliver the research project.

Significance of proposed research and outcomes (20% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following

- Potential of the likely outcomes or findings of this research to increase knowledge about macular or retinal disease.
- Potential of the outcomes or findings to contribute to MDFA's objectives of reducing the impact of the macular disease, or the related issue, being investigated.
- Potential for this research to be extended into further research projects or translated into clinical and/or public health practice or policy.
- Alignment with the research areas identified by MDFA.
- The likely interest from other researchers, conference organisers, journals, community groups, and policy makers in the outcomes of this research.

Innovation of the concept and approach (25% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following questions:

- Is the proposed research new/novel or creative??
- Are the techniques cutting edge?
- Will the research contribute to and inform current knowledge, or transform practices or approaches, and other researchers within this field of research?
- How well does the proposal describe the new ideas, procedures, technologies, programs or health policy settings?

Applicant's capability, relative to opportunity (10% weighting)

This is considered in terms of appropriateness of the applicant team and their expertise, the resources and access to additional personnel necessary for the project. Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following:

- Does the research team, including Co-Investigators have the required tools and techniques established in their laboratories?

- Does the research team, including Co-Investigators have the expertise required to successfully complete the research plan?
- Is the team, including Co-Investigators operating in an appropriately supportive research environment?

Consumer involvement (10% weighting)

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to, the following aspects:

- How the macular disease community have been either considered or consulted with in the design of the research project.
- How consumers will be involved throughout the project.
Note: we expect the level of consumer involvement to vary depending on the nature of the research.

Successful grant applications

If a grant is awarded to a successful applicant **after the completion of Stage 2**:

1. The administering institution must accept responsibility for indirect costs of the research and for grant administration. MDFA will not fund indirect research costs, institutional overheads or any institutional administrative charges.
2. Progress reports (half yearly and a final report on completion) must be completed by the Primary Investigator upon commencement of funding.
3. The Primary Investigator may be asked to present their research to representatives of MDFA, the MDFA Research Committee, and/or the MDFA community.
4. Grant recipients must advise MDFA in advance of any public dissemination of the research, including publications and conference presentations, or in any other form or medium. Any presentations and publications must disclose the research grant funding provided by MDFA in accordance with ethical publication practices.
5. MDFA reserves the right to withhold all or part of the grant (as described in the funding contract).
6. MDFA may, from time to time and where appropriate, request the grant recipient assist with publicity, advocacy or to provide other assistance at special events. The recipient should make all reasonable efforts to assist.
7. The grant recipient must comply with the regulations and requirements of their host institution. It is not the responsibility of MDFA to provide materials, equipment, supervision, overhead recovery, or any other resources needed to conduct the research.
8. The research must conform to relevant standards of ethics, safety and privacy. Applicants must provide evidence of adherence to these standards if requested to do so by MDFA.

Further information about the application process

For further information, please contact:

Research Grants Program, Macular Disease Foundation Australia

Email: research@mdfoundation.com.au

Section B: Instructions for completing the Expression of Interest application form

Notes for applicants:

1. Please provide sufficient information and justification in your application to enable the MDFA Grant Review Panel to make a competitive assessment.
2. When completing the application, applicants should use language that is accessible to a non-expert in the field.
3. Where possible, please avoid using acronyms or abbreviations, and provide succinct and clear definitions or explanations of any technical terms throughout the application.

Part 1: Applicant and Institution information

This part requests information about the Primary Investigator and Co-Investigators applying for the grant, including their qualifications, current and previous appointments, and details of the proposed host Institution.

If the proposed host Institution is not registered as an Administering Institution with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and/or the Australian Research Council (ARC), please contact MDFA to discuss eligibility.

Evidence of Australian citizenship or permanent residency

The primary investigator must be an Australian citizen or permanent resident at the time of the grant application. Evidence to support residency status must be provided on request and will be required from successful candidates prior to any offer of funding.

Research environment

The applicant is to describe the host Institution's research environment, and how it will support their research. A description of the relevant facilities available for the project should be included. Address how the research environment will benefit the applicant's capacity to conduct macular disease-related research.

Part 2: Applicant's capacity to conduct the research

Principal Investigator experience and contributions

This part asks about the applicant's relevant experience and contribution to the macular disease and/or retinal disease field, and to people with macular disease.

Current and previous grant awards

Please provide full details of current and previous research grant awards for the Principal Investigator. Please list any MDFA grants and/or other funding awarded in the last 5 years.

Please list source of funding, project title, duration and level of funding. Please list most recent grant awards first, and ensure that full details are provided, including years and amounts awarded.

Previous research outputs

In reverse chronological order, the applicant must list the details and full references of their top three most relevant peer-reviewed publications that highlight their experience, qualifications and contribution to the field. Please also include any relevant patents and commercialisation activity (if appropriate) for the primary investigator in the past 5 years.

Part 3: Project summary and research plan

This section includes the project title and project summary and research plan.

Type of grant being applied for

Please indicate the type of grant you are applying for (i.e. Macular Disease Foundation Research Grant, or Grant Family Fund awards), by checking the relevant box on the application form.

Total grant amount being requested

Please include the **total grant amount (excluding GST) being requested**.

This total amount should include the following as relevant:

1. Personnel: total cost of the personnel involved (based on hourly rate/salary and percentage of time on project).
2. Consumables: including laboratory reagents, antibodies, postage, printing, survey production costs, software etc.
3. Equipment: equipment that is unique to the proposed research project and is essential for the project to succeed. The grant will not fund the purchase of computers unless they are of a specialised nature required for the operation of laboratory equipment for this specific project.
4. Travel: (specify whether for data collection, collaboration and/or dissemination). Please note that travel costs are funded only in exceptional circumstances and when required as part of the project activities.

Please refer to Section A – MDFA Research Grants Program for details on grant amounts and duration.

Note 1: research funds provided by MDFA shall be expended within Australia, unless otherwise approved (in exceptional circumstances) in writing by MDFA.

Note 2: MDFA will not fund indirect research costs, institutional overheads, institutional infrastructure or any institutional administrative charges.

Project title

Insert the title of the project (25 words maximum).

Background and magnitude of the problem being addressed

Provide the context and background to the proposed research project (200 words maximum). Indicate how the primary research subject and approach fit with existing knowledge and other research currently being undertaken.

Provide a clear statement of the magnitude of the problem (e.g. incidence, consequences, impact on people with macular disease, their family, carers, community) to be addressed by the research. Include references, and any relevant images, or figures as a separate page (max total 3 images/figures/tables, excluded from word count).

Aims and hypothesis

Provide a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the proposed research, research question and/or hypotheses to be tested (200 words maximum).

Methodology

Please describe the approach to the research, including study design, sampling, relevant techniques, protocols, and data analysis procedures (including statistical tests and power calculations, if appropriate). (200 words maximum).

Outcomes being measured and significance of proposed findings

Describe the expected outcomes of the research, why they were chosen and how they will be measured. Provide a clear statement of how the research will be applied in the real world over the short-, medium- and/or long-term, including anticipation of the barriers that need to be addressed. Is there potential for the project to lead to the development of patents and/or the commercialisation of any technology? How will the results of the research be disseminated? (200 words maximum).

Benefit for people with a macular or retinal disease

Describe the ways in which the proposed research is innovative, including the relevance and significance of the project and the expected outcomes for people with macular disease. (200 words maximum).

Consumer participation

Please describe how you have either considered or consulted with the macular disease community in the design of your project and how consumers will be involved throughout the project. Note: we expect the level of consumer involvement to vary depending on the nature of the research. (200 words maximum).

Ethics approval

Please indicate if the project requires approval by an appropriate ethics committee, and if this approval has been granted or not, and if not, how the approvals will be obtained.

References

References are included within the overall page count (eight pages total).
References can be in 10-point font.

Conflict of Interest

Please provide details of any actual or potential conflict of interest that the applicant may have in relation to this research. For example, declaration of any support received from, or being sought from, any commercial industry that may benefit from this work, or from any of their agencies or subsidiaries.