



The Lay Summary in medical research proposals – is it becoming more important?

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Introduction

One of the skills every researcher must learn is how to present complex ideas and medical or scientific terms to a “lay” audience. That audience includes carers, long-term users of services, organisations representing consumers’ interests, members of the public who are the potential recipients of health promotion programmes, or researchers from a different clinical or academic background to their own.

Most researchers, and those who support them, find writing a lay summary a difficult task. This poster explores some of the purposes and current tensions surrounding its use.



1. What is a lay summary?

The most succinct definition the authors have found is by Buckland et al (2007), part of the National Institute for Health Research funded INVOLVE programme to encourage “People in Research” who define a lay summary as

“a brief summary of a research project or a research proposal that has been written for members of the public, rather than researchers or professionals. It should be written in plain English, avoid the use of jargon and explain any technical terms that have to be included” [1]

2. The three purposes of a lay summary

The lay summary is used by grant funders as part of

- Grant application and ethical review processes
- Public understanding of science, particularly important for fundraising charities
- Raising and justifying funds from government for science to underpin improvements in healthcare.

3. What should a lay summary contain?

To fulfil these purposes, the lay summary should:

□ **Paint the big picture**

The lay summary is probably the first, maybe the only part of a grant application that a busy reviewer will actually read, so it needs to give an overview of the whole project – its background, aims and expected impact.

The National Institute for Health Research - Research for Patient Benefit scheme expects patients and carers to be represented in the design and management of studies [2]. A clear summary makes a project accessible by laypersons, becoming more involved in some funders’ peer review processes.

For example: The **Cystic Fibrosis (CF) Trust** is typical of a UK charity that has both parent and patient representatives sitting on its Research Advisory Committee alongside science and medical experts. Their input and opinions are seen as very important by the CF Trust, and the lay summary will also be read by the charity’s Trustees when giving their approval to the applications that have been recommended to them for funding.

□ **Answer “who? what? where? when? why? how?”**

It is vital that a lay summary is well written, compelling, and demonstrates the significance of the research. It should answer the “**so what?**” question often uppermost in the minds of many reviewers, i.e. what makes this project exciting, relevant and worth doing now, above any of the others in their pile to review (or even above their own current research ideas)? Hence the lay summary can make a critical difference in how a proposal is reviewed and evaluated, but there is little agreement on how much space is available to get its message across.

The UK Research Councils permit 4,000 characters in a grant application lay summary. By contrast research charities often use *word* limits that vary widely: the Stroke Association allows 1,000 words but the British Heart Foundation merely 100.

□ **Be written in “plain English”**

But how plain? While it may be obvious not to use medical jargon, to spell out abbreviations and try to explain technical terms, “plain English” means different things to different people. The guidance offered by funders is often contradictory and frequently unclear.

For example: The Medical Research Council (MRC) advises that the lay summary should be written “**for a reader of a middle-market tabloid newspaper.**” - probably not a style that comes naturally to most researchers even if they regularly read the *Daily Mail* or the *Daily Express*. The Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) simply says write “**in a way that could be publicised to a general audience**”. Perhaps most challenging, the Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), which funds extensive medical engineering research, has said the lay summary should suit “**an interested 14 year old**”. That is, a child with some scientific knowledge but below the level of GCSE sciences.

Charities’ guidance confuses the picture even further. The Prostate Cancer Charity says the lay summary “**should be pithy and jargon free as far as possible**”. Arthritis Research UK asks that “**The lay summary should be written as if it were to be published in the science pages of a major broadsheet paper or a journal such as *The Economist*. Bill Bryson’s book, ‘A short history of nearly everything’, is a stunning example of how everyday objects and activities can be used to describe complex areas of science including nuclear physics and astronomy.**” ARUK goes on to suggest the writer should consider “**using simple analogies to give the reader the sense, if not the detail, of what you are planning to do**” [3].

Conclusion

The role of the lay summary is changing, and for many grant funders it is clearly becoming more important: for example Arthritis Research UK is now putting projects to a lay audience for assessment *before* scientific peer review. Funders differ in what they expect from it, and there is no consensus on guiding applicants how to write one. Could the Research Councils or Association of Medical Research Charities take a role in issuing such guidance?

References

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