

Open Letter to the CIRM Board: Urgent Call to Adapt and Preserve Scientific Merit in Funding

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The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM), created by a 2004 statewide vote, is one of the world's boldest public investments in science. Born from a national funding crisis, it aimed to not only accelerate cures but repair a broken research system. For two decades, CIRM has fueled breakthrough therapies and careers—yet today, it risks drifting from the principles that inspired its founding.

That mission depends on a fair and transparent grant review process—one that prioritizes scientific merit above all else. At the heart of any scientific grant system—however imperfect—is a core ideal: proposals should be evaluated based on their **scientific merit**. While all researchers and reviewers recognize that grant review is never flawless, the intent is always to improve fairness and rigor. Alarming, **CIRM has gone in the opposite direction**—implementing a process that excludes most applications from any scientific evaluation at all, simply to make logistics more manageable.

“Positive Selection Review” Isn’t Just Flawed—It’s Fundamentally Merit-Free

CIRM states that it evaluates grant proposals based on scientific merit, innovation, potential impact, and feasibility. **Yet today, an application only gets a chance at that due process if it first clears a thoroughly opaque “positive selection” process.** There are no stated criteria for this pre-screening—being “liked” by unnamed reviewers is not a scientific standard. Yet this “positive selection” has become the primary filter, one that now blocks the vast majority of proposals from ever being judged on their science – a true peer review.

Here is the statistical data. In the 2023 DISC0 application round, 144 applications were submitted. Only 48 (1/3) made it past positive selection for actual peer review; the rest—nearly 100 full proposals—were discarded without any scientific review, with 11 proposals eventually receiving CIRM funds. In the ongoing 2025 DISC0 round, the situation is even worse: 372 full applications were submitted, and only approximately 45 (~12%) passed the positive selection stage. **That means 327 full-length scientific proposals (~88%) were outright discarded before anyone even looked at them from a scientific merit standpoint.** This is not triage. This is exclusion.

Each of these discarded proposals represents months of research, planning, and writing—some with truly groundbreaking ideas. Yet their fate is decided not on scientific content, but on a **1,000-character summary**—less than 1% of the full proposal—reviewed in a system where **reviewers aren’t required to read it or provide feedback**. They simply click whether they “liked” the preview and PI. Even applications that pass this first round can be eliminated in a second “likability” screen, where only the most “liked” are allowed through. Let’s be clear: **this “positive selection” process is fundamentally flawed and undermines the goal of funding the best science.**

CIRM Is Blocking Competition to Clear a Path for “Selected” Proposals

The consequences are deeply troubling. The CIRM Board has reportedly acknowledged the record number of applications in the 2025 DISC0 round, and is considering doubling the number of DISC0 awards to approximately 22. This is a step in the right direction, but unless the number of **applications undergoing merit-based review is also expanded proportionally to reflect ~2.5 increase in submissions**, the result will simply be **more grants awarded to a tiny, pre-selected pool of proposals**—selected not on

scientific merit, but on superficial first impressions. I have no doubt that many pre-selected CIRM proposals are scientifically solid, but a near 50% funding rate among those that passed positive selection is nearly unprecedented in modern research funding—and it appears to have been engineered by artificially removing competition.

There Is a Better, Fairer Path Forward

CIRM has a strong history of listening to public input via official channels. This open letter is an extraordinary, three-alarm appeal—outside those regular channels—only because of the urgent timing before the August review cycle.

Here is what can be done now. If application volume has increased two- or threefold, then **the number of proposals undergoing scientific review must expand accordingly**. Yes, it is logistically challenging—but it is solvable. If needed, CIRM should delay decisions, recruit more reviewers, and allocate additional resources. The **only justifiable screening step before peer review** should be a “negative selection” process that removes applications that clearly fail to meet eligibility or basic alignment with CIRM’s mission.

The Grants Working Group meeting for the 2025 DISC0 program is scheduled for mid-August. There is still time for the CIRM Board to do the right thing, and expand the number of applications to be reviewed. Applicants have waited more than a year for the latest DISC0 call. We are willing to wait a bit longer if that means our work will be given the honest, thoughtful, merit-based evaluation it deserves. That’s the deal we made with California. That’s the promise CIRM was founded on. Let’s keep that promise, and make CIRM even better.

Best regards,

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