

# My success story: How I managed to get 2 NFR grants



The Research Council  
of Norway



Ruth Brenk, Department of Biomedicine  
University of Bergen, Norway

# My background

- 43 years old
- 3 children (3, 5, and 8 years old)
- German

**Education:** Mark: Summa cum laude, price for an excellent thesis

- 2003 PhD
- 1994-1998 Pharmacy Degree

**Work history:**

- 2003-2005 Postdoc, UCSF, USA
- 2005-2012 Lecturer, D
- 2012-2015 Junior prof

Temporary leader of the biorecognition group  
Leader of the facility for Biophysics, Structural Biology, and Screening (BiSS)

Head of the computational chemistry group and member of the decision-making core group of the drug discovery

Young investigator award of DPhG

# My background

## COMMISSIONS OF TRUST

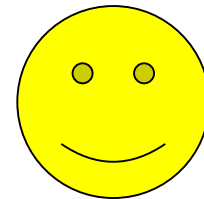
- ...
- 2013 - 2017      Member of the Peer Review College of the Wellcome Trust (UK)

## Track record

- Total number of publications: 46
- cited 1183 times
- h-index: 21

# FriMedBio application

- Topic: Exploration of the chemical space of riboswitch ligands
- History:
- 2003: conference fellowship, got to know topic
- 2008-12: PhD student working on the topic
  - One paper plus one review published
  - Two grant applications rejected
  - Did not get tenure in Dundee
- 2013: obtained internal money for one year, put another PhD student on the project
- 2015: NFR application rejected
- 2016: NFR application successful



# FriMedBio application

- Why was second application successful?

	2015	2016
Scientific merit	5	6
Boldness in scientific thinking and scientific innovation	B	A
The project manager and project group	5	6
Implementation plan and resource parameters	A	A
International cooperation	B	A
Dissemination and communication of results	B	A
Overall assessment of the referee/panel	5	6

What had changed:

- Nature paper from another group, further validation of target
- More preliminary results
- Dissemination plan more explicit
- Argued for cooperation partners

# Lessons learnt

- Be persistent
- Keep on working!
- Critically read the feedback letter and make sensible changes



Funding rate is very low

Give your best!

Set up plenty of time (I block one month)

Learn from others

- read successful applications
- ask for feedback
- review proposals

# BEDREHELSE application

- Topic: Antibiotic resistance
  - had to be in collaboration with partners in India
- Got to know very early about the call (about 4 month before deadline)
- Mental preparation
- Confirmed scope of call with NFR
- Used my network to find partners
- Made sure that project is consistent and a true collaboration
- Got feedback from Ramune
  - Specific call is not a FriMedBio application
- Suggested 3 reviewers, one ended up in the panel

# BEDREHELSE application

- Specific calls can have higher success rates than FriMedBio (11 vs 21 %)
- Topic has to be addressed
- Topic might not come again in the near future



# Reviewer experience

- Proposals are not read in chronological order
  - Title, CV, abstract, figures, summery
- End proposal with a strong, positive note
  - exiting project, you are the right person to deliver it
- Not much time to spend with a single proposal
  - Has to be easy to read, use figures
- Reviewers are most likely not from your field
  - Others must be able to understand it
- Most proposals have to be rejected
  - Everything with an obvious flaw is out
- All parts of proposal matter
  - It is okay to draft letters of support for others, but don't make it obvious

# Summary

- Put eggs in right basket (project has to fit to call, prioritize)
- Keep working on the weak points of your project while it is under review
- All parts of the application matter
- Suggest reviewers
- Communicate with NFR
- Ask for feedback
- You need luck!



# Summary

**The only thing that is certain:**

**If you don't apply for funding, you won't get it!**