

PRINCIPLES: Research in-Practice Fellowships for Health and Social Care Practitioners (RPF)

Targeting talented health and social care practitioners who are interested in advancing applied health and social care research at post-PhD level (or equivalent level of experience and competence) while continuing to deliver patient or social care.



02 July 2025

Introduction

The Health Research Board (HRB) Strategy (2021-2025: Health research – making an impact)¹ highlights six strategic objectives for the HRB, including the building of a strong and supportive environment for health research in Ireland. Within this objective, the HRB is committed to investing strategically in research leadership and building a vibrant community of health and social care researchers from different professions, backgrounds, and research interests, and working in and across a range of settings including universities and TUs, hospitals and primary, community and social care settings.

To support this commitment, the HRB has designed a suite of schemes aimed at creating a diverse workforce of health and social care researchers via the dual research career path, targeting both academic and practitioner researchers. One such initiative is the '**Research in-Practice Fellowships for Health and Social Care Practitioners**'. The scheme is designed to support practitioners who wish to advance their research skills at post-PhD level while continuing to deliver patient or social care. It targets health and social care practitioners from a variety of professional backgrounds, who are interested in advancing applied health and social care research aimed at finding practical solutions to specific problems. These fellowships replace the 'Clinician Scientist Fellowships' (CSF) scheme and are a part of the HRB research career path for practitioners.

- For clarity, the HRB defines **health and social care practitioners** (thereafter referred to as practitioners) as professionals delivering care to patients and service users in different health and social care settings, such as community, primary and acute. This group includes Dentists, Health and Social Care Professionals (as listed by the National Health and Social Care Professions Office²), Medics, Nurses and Midwives and Pharmacists.

Aim and objectives

The **aim** is to provide opportunities for talented health and social care practitioners from a variety of professional backgrounds to conduct research at post-PhD level while continuing to deliver patient care or social care as practitioner researchers.

- The HRB defines **practitioner researchers** as health and social care practitioners who combine research with clinical or social care practice and whose work spans the academic and health and social care settings.

The **main objectives** of the scheme are to:

- Support practitioners to consolidate their research skills and expertise post-PhD and to progressively develop themselves as more independent practitioner researchers.
- Support practitioners to conduct and manage applied health and social care research projects which are aimed at finding practical solutions to specific problems or evidence gaps.
- Provide funding for the prospective fellows and the proposed project, and to support them in enhancing their development and growth as a researcher and as a research manager.

¹ <https://www.hrb.ie/about/strategy-2025/>

² <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/health-and-social-care-professionals/the-26-health-and-social-care-professions/>

- Enable the prospective fellows to gain experience of working with academic partners and knowledge users in relevant policy and/or practice organisations.
- Provide fellows with direct experience in the conduct of health research projects which reduce the gap between research findings and clinical practice and/or health policy, and which ultimately impact health outcomes.

It is expected that during the awards the fellows will:

- Deepen existing and or establish new collaborations and partnerships, including with knowledge users who are in a position to influence policy and practice
- Develop clear, independent thinking
- Strengthen their research experience
- Broaden their horizons
- Learn new research skills and methodologies
- Manage a grant in their own right.

Ultimately, the fellowship should create more independent researchers who can competitively apply to more advanced funding schemes in the future.

Key changes from the previous Clinician Scientist Fellowship scheme

1. HRB would like to broaden the distribution of grants at this level across professions. Therefore, incentives for applicants from underrepresented professions (other than medicine) are introduced.

a) Change of scheme name

The name of the scheme has been changed to enhance the visibility of the scheme across professional backgrounds and target a wider range of health and social care professionals in Ireland.

b) Introduction of two funding streams

To encourage more applications from underrepresented professions (other than medicine) and improve their success rate, this scheme will fund practitioner researchers via two streams:

- Medical practitioners
- Health and social care practitioners (non-medics)

While the guidance, assessment criteria, application forms, and review process remain the same across both streams, applications will be streamed based on the Lead Applicant's profession. The applications will be ranked at shortlisting and panel recommendation stage within their own streams. Importantly, applications will be reviewed by the same panel and quality standards (assessed against the same criteria) will be paramount across both streams.

We envisage approximately the same number of grants for medical practitioners as for health and social care practitioners (non-medics), subject to quality.

2. Increase of research related costs cap to up **€80,000** (previously €50,000).
3. Shortening of the gap between the end of PhD and the start of postdoctoral period.

Applicants must have a PhD or have equivalent research experience or be in the final stage of their PhD to be eligible to apply. If the applicant is in their final stages of their PhD, they must defend their thesis prior to 1 September 2026.

4. Extension of the application stage from typically 10-12 weeks to approximately 18-19 weeks (including the Christmas period) to provide more time to prospective applicants to apply.

Scope

The scheme will support fellows to advance applied health and social care research projects where specific problems or evidence gaps are documented and where the project is focused on practical solutions, with a clear pathway to impact.

The case for the questions posed and the related methodology, partners and knowledge users must be clearly and convincingly set out in the application form.

In line with the strategic remit of the HRB, research projects are welcome spanning the areas of clinical research, population health research and/or health services research.

Clinical research

Research with the goal of improving the diagnosis and treatment of disease and injury and of improving the health and quality of life of individuals as they pass through normal life stages. Clinical research is conducted on or for the treatment of patients and involves direct participation of patients and healthy subjects and/or their samples and/or their data.

Health services research (HSR)

Research with the goal of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of health professionals and the health care system through changes to practice and policy. Health services research is a multidisciplinary field of scientific investigation that studies how social factors, financing systems, organisational structures and processes, health technologies, and personal behaviours affect access to health care, the quality and cost of healthcare and ultimately health and well-being.

Population health research (PHR)

Research with the goal of improving the health of the population, or of defined sub-populations, through a better understanding of the ways in which social, cultural, environmental, occupational and economic factors determine health status or through the identification of effective interventions for improving health status and reducing health inequalities.

Funding and duration

The fellowship will support

- **Salary-related costs** for the pro rata salary-related costs of the fellow up to 0.5 FTE. The HRB funding will cover the corresponding FTE of the salary-related costs of the locum replacement of

the lead applicant in line with the appropriate professional scale. Where the lead applicant is based in private clinical practice (e.g., General Practitioner or Pharmacist), the salary may directly support the FTE of the lead applicant dedicated to the grant and the academic contract offered should be in line with the Host Institution (HI) clinical academic scale.

- **Research-related costs** can be requested up to a maximum value of €80,000 over the lifetime of the fellowship (e.g. running costs, training and development costs, dissemination costs, etc).

The HRB does not pay overheads in fellowships.

It is the HRB's expectation that fellows will dedicate 0.5 FTE to the fellowship while continuing practice activities.

We envisage to award up to 10 fellowships in this call with an investment in the region of €7 million. In order to diversify the workforce of practitioner researchers from a wide range of professional backgrounds working in the health and social care system in Ireland, we plan to fund approximately

- Five medical practitioners.
- Five practitioners from all health and social care professions (non-medics), such as Dentists, health and social care professions (as listed by the National Health and Social Care Professions Office³), Nurses and Midwives, and Pharmacists.

The fellowship will have a duration between 48 and 60 months.

Lead Applicant's Eligibility

Lead Applicants (LA) can be individuals who are currently:

- Working in Ireland
- Working overseas
- On a career break

A Lead Applicant must:

- Hold a PhD degree or defend their PhD thesis before 1 September 2026 or be able to demonstrate equivalent research experience as defined in the 'Towards a European Framework for Research Careers'.⁴
 - The HRB PhD Equivalency application process is currently under review. It is anticipated that the HRB will start processing applications again in early September. Updated information will be published on the HRB website as it becomes available⁵.
- Have completed their professional training (Medics need to have completed their general training and may be at Specialist Registrar (SpR) level).

³ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/health-and-social-care-professionals/the-26-health-and-social-care-professions/>

⁴ https://cdn5.euraxess.org/sites/default/files/policy_library/towards_a_european_framework_for_research_careers_final.pdf

⁵ <https://www.hrb.ie/funding/funding-opportunities/before-you-apply/>

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- Apply from a HI based in the Republic of Ireland.
- Hold (or will hold at the time of the award being made):
 - a clinical post in the Irish health service or social care organisation which covers or will cover the duration of the award if successful (e.g., SpR, hospital consultant, nurse practitioner, public health practitioner, physiotherapist)
 - or**
 - a clinical post in a private practice (e.g. General Practitioners, private physiotherapy practice, private dentist practice, private pharmacy)
 - or**
 - a post in a health and social care organisation (e.g. Tusla, Section 38 or Section 39 agencies)
 - or**
 - a joint clinical and academic teaching/education position without a research element within a Higher Education Institution and the Irish Health Services or other social care organisations
 - or**
 - if not currently working in Ireland, have the support of a HRB approved HI and have already obtained or are negotiating a post in a clinical or a social care services organisation in the Republic of Ireland

Note: Practitioners who are currently engaged in research only or in research combined other academic activities but are not involved in care delivery, are not eligible to apply to this scheme.

Application and review process

The scheme will use a one-stage application process, consisting of an open call for applications from prospective fellows, followed by peer and public review and an applicant response phase to the reviewers' comments. Based on the international peer-review, a selected number of candidates will be invited then for an interview with an international Panel.

Once submitted, applications will be streamed based on the lead applicant's professional background:

- Medical practitioners
- or
- Health and social care practitioners (non-medics)

The applications will be assessed within their group at both shortlisting and interview (panel recommendations) stages. Importantly, applications across the two streams will have the same application form, the same assessment criteria and quality standards (applications will be assessed against the same assessment criteria), and will be reviewed by the same international panel.

Timeline

Activity	Timeline
Board review of detailed call documents	End September 2025
Call launch (Subject to Board approval)	1 October 2025
Deadline for applications	Mid-February 2026
Peer and public review and shortlisting	March-Mid-June 2026
Applicant Response phase	Mid to end of June 2026
Panel Interviews	Early September 2026
Board approval of funding recommendations	End September 2026
Start of Grants	January 2027 onwards