



J&J Sponsorship of the ImproveCareNow (ICN) Research Awards: Request for Proposals (RFP) – 2026

This Request for Proposals (RFP) outlines requirements for the 2026 ICN Research Awards, supported through sponsorship from Johnson & Johnson (J&J).

1 – Program Overview

Through this J&J sponsored program, ICN invites faculty-led proposals from ICN Centers for one-year research projects aimed at advancing remission and sustained remission in pediatric and young adult inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Projects should leverage ICN's multi-center registry (~33,000 patients) and network infrastructure to generate insights that may improve outcomes, identify drivers of treatment failure, and strengthen readiness for pediatric and young adult IBD research studies.

Project Aims – The proposal should address one of the three following research aims/domains.

Domain/Aim 1: Identify and characterize high-risk pediatric IBD subgroups and evaluate early(6-12 months diagnosis) predictors of poor outcomes

Purpose:

Define clinically meaningful and identifiable subgroups of pediatric IBD patients at highest risk for poor outcomes and biologic failure.

Integrated elements:

- Clinical phenotypes and comorbidity clusters
- Early disease characteristics (from diagnosis to within 6–12 months)
- Baseline rates (i.e. at time of diagnosis) disease location, phenotype, activity (as measured by PGA, SPCDAI, and PUCAI) and growth parameters.
- Predictors of poor outcomes and biologic failure
- **Description:**
The focus of this domain/aim will be to identify subgroups of pediatric patients with Crohn's disease and/or ulcerative colitis who experience poor long-term (5 years or more) outcomes, including multiple biologic failures or surgery. Analyses could

focus on early disease features such as disease location, behavior, severity indices, growth parameters, and laboratory markers to establish baseline risk profiles and rates of biologic failure across the ICN population.

Domain/Aim 2: Identify demographic, socio-economic, and access-related drivers of disparities in outcomes

Purpose:

Understand how social and structural factors contribute to inequitable outcomes in pediatric IBD.

Integrated elements:

- Demographic and socio-economic factors
- Access-related profiles (e.g. appointments, follow-ups, travel time, insurance etc.)
- Disparities in outcomes and treatment response
- Early disease characteristics

Description:

This domain/aim will assess demographic, socio-economic, and access-related factors and their interaction with clinical characteristics to identify disparities in disease outcomes. The goal is to elucidate drivers of inequitable health outcomes, including delayed treatment, differential response to therapy, and increased risk of poor outcomes among vulnerable populations.

Domain/Aim 3: Quantify disease burden, patient journeys, and healthcare utilization in high-risk populations

Purpose:

Characterize the real-world burden of disease among patients with poor outcomes.

Integrated elements:

- Patient journeys (medical therapy, surgery, hospitalizations)
- Healthcare resource utilization (e.g. ED utilization, hospitalizations, surgeries etc.)
- Corticosteroid exposure and nutritional interventions
- Growth and developmental impacts

Description:

This aim will characterize patient journeys among those with multiple biologic failures, including patterns of medical therapy, surgery, and hospitalizations. It will quantify healthcare resource utilization and assess broader disease burden metrics such as

corticosteroid exposure, nutritional interventions, and impacts on growth and development, comparing high-risk patients with those achieving sustained remission.

2 - Eligibility

Eligible applicants must:

- **Be a faculty-level (including junior faculty) Principal Investigator (PI)** at an ICN-affiliated Center.
Trainees may participate as members of the investigative team but **may not serve as PI**.
- **Submit the application through their Center**, which will serve as the contracting entity and awardee of record. Sites must be able to finalize subcontract of award within 8 – 10 weeks of notification.
Awards cannot be issued to individuals.
- **Be in good standing with ICN**, including meeting participation expectations and complying with all applicable data-use, privacy, security, and regulatory requirements.
- **Demonstrate adequate institutional capacity** to support the proposed work, including:
 - Sufficient protected research time
 - Access to biostatistics/analytic expertise
 - Appropriate data management resources and ICN data pathways
- **Use award funds only for eligible research activities.**
The program supports faculty PIs; funds may not be used for clinical time billed as patient care, and product-specific studies are out of scope.

3 – Key Dates & Milestones

Below are the anticipated program milestones. Final dates will be confirmed at launch.

Icon	Milestone	Target Date
	RFP Release Date	September 1, 2026
	Q&A Session	September 17, 2026 from 12 – 1 pm in Ambassador 1-2 Fall Community Conference
	Submission Deadline (23:59 local time)	October 16, 2026 (6 weeks post announcement)

	Review Period 1: Scientific Review Individual scoring; panel meeting(s); rank & recommend	October 21 – November 6
	Review Period 2: Review Meetings	November 9-20
	Anticipated Grant Award Notification	December 1, 2026
	Public Announcement	December 7, 2026
	Anticipated Project Start Date	January 1, 2027 (dependent upon contracting and approvals)
	Anticipated Project End Date	January 1, 2028

4 - Grant Term and Stipulations

Program Duration and Funding:

- **Project Duration:** 12-month period.
- **Number of Awards:** Up to **two competitive awards** for the 2026 cycle.
- **Total Program Funds:** Up to **\$45,000/award** for the full cycle; final allocation across one or two Centers will be determined during contracting based on proposal scope and quality.
- **Allowable Costs:**
 - Direct FTE compensation to Center for faculty and personnel support (research effort only).
 - Center-related Data Management Cost, Biostatistics and any other analytical support
 - ICN or centre biostatistics support (to be deducted from award amount if ICN provides)
 - Conference costs up to \$2000, inclusive of registration, travel, and accommodations when presenting findings
- **Not Allowable:**
 - Indirect or overhead costs
 - Capital equipment not essential to the work
 - Expenses unrelated to approved project aims
 - Clinical time billed as patient care

Contracting and Administration

- Awards are made to **Centers**, not individuals.
- ICN will award J&J sponsored funds to selected Centers.
- A brief kickoff meeting (ICN/ PI) will occur within **30 days** of project start. J&J representatives may participate as the programme sponsor, as appropriate.

Deliverables and Reporting Requirements

Awardees must provide:

- **Quarterly milestone updates**
- **Final report/Manuscript** summarizing results, limitations, implications for remission/sustained remission, and a description of analytic outputs, as applicable
- A **summary output** suitable for community engagement
- A **presentation** at an ICN conference or a national meeting (e.g. DDW, Crohn's Congress, NASPHGAN or DDW) aligned with program communications and public announcement

Compliance, Ethics, and Data Access

- All work must adhere to **ICN registry governance**, applicable **IRB requirements**, and **data-security controls**, particularly when using PHI/limited datasets.
- Publications and presentations must acknowledge support from the ICN Research Award programme, sponsored by Johnson & Johnson, as per the award letter.

Funding-Contingent Requirements

(Confirmed at time of award)

- Executed **IRB approval** or exemption
- Center attestation of protected research time, **biostatistics/data capacity** and designated contacts
- **Conflict-of-interest** disclosures for PI and key personnel
- Any additional requirements specified in the award notice (e.g., data-security checklist)

5 – How to Submit

- **Submit a single PDF** containing all required sections through the ICN submission portal (link provided in the launch communication).
- **Submit by the stated Submission Deadline.**
Late or incomplete applications **cannot be reviewed**.

6 – Submission Requirements

Applicants must submit through the submission portal and complete all required sections. Applications that do not follow these instructions or deviate from formatting requirements **may be disqualified**.

A. Required Components (in order)

1. General Information

Must include:

- Project Title
- Center Name
- Applicant/PI and Key Personnel
- **250-word lay abstract**

Candidate Information & Career Development Goals

Provide a clear description of the Applicant/Pis:

- Provision of CVs or **NIH-style biosketches** for the PI and key personnel as applicable.
- Background and commitment to a research career and ICN Center
- Long-term career goals and how the proposed research supports them

Brief Research Plan

Organize using **Significance, Innovation, and Approach:**

- **Specific Aims** of the research
- **Significance:** Importance of the problem; expected impact on IBD outcomes and scientific knowledge.
- **Innovation:** Novel concepts, methods, or analytics; potential to shift practice or understanding.
- **Approach:** Study design, population, data extracts, analytic plan. Explain how the project meets the research objectives.
- **Preliminary data** (if available)
- **Data & ICN Access Plan:** Describe required ICN registry extracts, biostatistics and analytic support, data management, security and privacy safeguards

Timeline & Deliverables

Include:

- Quarterly milestones
- Final report deliverables
- Presentation plan

Letter of Support

Required:

- Please provide a letter of support, signed by the appropriate divisional leadership confirming organizational support, protected effort, available resources, and the candidate's potential and mentorship plan for achieving research independence.

7 – Review and Approval Process

All applications will undergo a **review by a representative group of ICN stakeholders. J&J, as programme sponsor, may receive a summary of applications under funding consideration but will not make funding decisions.** Subject-matter experts may be engaged as needed.

Proposals will be evaluated using an **overall impact framework**, with scoring focused on scientific merit, feasibility, and alignment with program goals. A standardized evaluation guide will be used for all reviews.

Evaluation Criteria

Applications will be assessed on the following:

- **Significance**
Importance of the problem addressed; relevance and impact on improving remission and sustained remission.
- **Innovation**
Novelty of concepts, analytics, methods, or approaches; potential to shift understanding or practice.
- **Approach**
Rigor, quality, and feasibility of the study design; appropriateness of methods; analytic plan; risk mitigation; clarity of milestones achievable within one year.
- **Investigators**
Qualifications, experience, and readiness of the PI and team; adequacy of mentorship and Center support.
- **Environment**
Access to ICN data resources, biostatistical support, and institutional infrastructure necessary for successful completion.
- **Health Disparity**
Use of inclusive language; thoughtful integration of social drivers, ZIP-code context, and demographic factors; alignment with ICN’s mission and values.
- **Feasibility / Deliverability**
Likelihood that proposed aims can be completed within the 12-month project period.

An ICN-led steering committee, including relevant J&J Sponsor representatives as appropriate, will apply these criteria to assign overall impact scores and recommend award selections.

8 – Notification

All applicants will be notified **via email** by the **Anticipated Grant Award Notification date** specified in this RFP. During the review process, applicants may be contacted if clarification or additional information is required. Late or incomplete applications will not be considered.

9 – Questions

For questions about the **RFP content or submission process**, please email info@improvecarenow.org.