



April 27, 2012

To:
Dr. Alain Beaudet
President,
Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR),
Ottawa, Canada

Dr. Jane Aubin,
Chief Scientific Officer/VP Research,
CIHR
Ottawa, Canada

Members of the Governing Council of the CIHR

Dear Colleagues,

As active players in Canadian health research, we are all very conscious of the need for improvements to the funding provided by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (the CIHR). It is clear from the recent federal budget that, despite the plans to considerably reduce government spending in an effort to eliminate the federal deficit, the federal government recognizes that funding of health research in Canada is at a critically low level. Although the federal government imposed cuts on the CIHR, it has specifically insisted that the already limited funding of basic research should not be cut further. In these circumstances, any effort by CIHR to improve the manner in which its funds are used is very laudable. However, the majority of Canadian health researchers were clearly shocked by changes proposed in the CIHR's "Design Discussion Document" of February of this year and reiterated in subsequent presentations by the CIHR's Director. The trivial nature of the CIHR's responses recently published on its web site to the broad range of criticisms expressed by health researchers ignores the obvious and overwhelming grass-roots rejection of the planned changes.

We believe that the plans put forward by the administration of the CIHR in greater part display a failure to understand the real problems facing Canadian health researchers and a failure to correctly interpret the recommendations of the recent International Review Panel. Further, despite assurances to the contrary, it would not appear that the CIHR is seriously considering the extensive and well-argued criticisms of all aspects of its proposals emanating from its major clientele. In this situation we feel it is essential to add our voice to the appeal for an extensive reconsideration of the proposed changes to the CIHR funding programs and peer review process.

1) Dissatisfaction with the CIHR granting process is due almost entirely to the intense competition for very limited funds. The 80% dissatisfaction level among health researchers is the result of the inability of 80% to obtain a grant and has nothing to do with either the structure of the open funding programs or the peer review process.

2) The proposed changes to the grant programs will not solve the lack of funds. In the present financial climate only the elimination of wasteful spending and the redirection of funds can improve the level of success in the granting process. Elimination of many of the protected strategic programs, as recommended in the International Review Panel Report, a reduction in the number of Institutes and a reduction in the funds dispensed by each of the remaining Institutes would certainly help. In this context, administrative costs at the CIHR can only be exacerbated by the increased complexity of the proposed new peer review system, discussed below.

3) The establishment of a two-tier system of grants requires a two-tier system of peer reviewing with the inevitable outcome of two-tiers of research quality. This alone should exclude its consideration. The basis for generating and stimulating the best research is a strong and unique peer review system in which as nearly as possible all grants compete equally against each other. The CIHR should put its efforts into ensuring that this occurs rather than into establishing ill-conceived new programs. Even the old “Group Grant” program was based on separate projects each judged in a common peer review process against all other proposals.

4) Dissatisfaction with the present peer review system does not stem from a lack of intrinsic fairness and transparency, rather it is due to the poor funding levels. These inevitably lead to low rates of success and to difficulties on each peer review panel of deciding which 4 or 5 of a large group of equally excellent applications will be funded and which rejected. Under these circumstances, the proposed changes to the peer review system can do nothing to improve the funding success rate.

5) Breaking the peer review into three steps, none of which include a balanced in-depth analysis of both the project and the applicant’s track record, destroys the fundamental fairness of the process. In the Foundation/Programmatic Scheme the applicant is judged before his proposal, while in the Project scheme the reverse is the case. This can only lead to an even greater randomness of decisions and even less transparency, yet further increasing the level of dissatisfaction among the 80% plus applicants whose proposals will still be rejected. To discard the present peer review system in favour of a more complex, even more opaque and, most importantly, completely untested one is very obviously foolhardy. The present system can be certainly improved, but this should happen in increments and the intrinsic nature of the present in-depth analysis of both project and applicant must be retained at all costs.

We the undersigned agree with the opinions expressed in this letter and urge the CIHR to seriously reconsider the proposed changes to its granting system.

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