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# Canadian Society for Molecular Biosciences La Société Canadienne pour les Biosciences Moléculaires

February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014

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## Secretariat & CSMB Office:

Mrs. Wafaa H. Antonious  
Canadian Society for Molecular  
Biosciences  
c/o Rofail Conference and  
Management Services (RCMS)  
17 Dossetter Way  
Ottawa, ON K1G 4S3  
Canada  
Tel.: 613 421 7229  
Fax.: 613 421 9811  
Email: Contact@csmb-scbm.ca

The Honorable James Moore  
Minister of Industry  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0A6

## Re.: Response of the Canadian Society for Molecular Biosciences (CSMB) to the consultation on Canadian Science, Technology and Innovation policy.

Dear Minister Moore,

As president of the **Canadian Society for Molecular Biosciences (CSMB)** I thank the Minister of Industry for the opportunity to provide our feedback on the future strategy of the government aimed at "*continuing investments in discovery-driven research, strengthening Canada's knowledge base, supporting research infrastructure and providing incentives to private sector innovation.*" The CSMB represents over a thousand bioscientists at all career levels across the country and we have encouraged our members to respond individually to the online consultation process responding to the document "*Seizing Canada's Moment : Moving Forward in Science, Technology and Innovation*".

As president of the CSMB I would like to provide some reflections on behalf of the board, specifically to the questions raised in point three of the discussion paper that is closely linked to our member's expertise as scientists.

*"Questions: How might Canada build upon its success as a world leader in discovery-driven research?*

*Is the Government of Canada's suite of programs appropriately designed to best support research excellence?"*

We agree with the basic premise of the consultation paper emphasizing that successive Canadian governments have increased and largely sustained investments in basic discovery-driven and applied research supporting world-class innovation in academic institutions across our country. Investments in the **Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI)** have provided world-class equipment making our institutions competitive with the best in the world. The granting councils **Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)** and **National Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC)** have provided operating funds to make world-class discoveries and to provide training to highly qualified personnel who will continue to innovate in academic as well as in industrial environments. Indeed, as Canadians we can all be proud of these achievements!

The past investments have greatly broadened our capacity for innovation and knowledge creation and we confirm that *"There has also been a net migration of researchers over the past decade as Canada increasingly continues to be a sought-after destination for some of the world's brightest minds."* The government of Canada has maintained the investments in the granting councils in challenging economic times, showing its continued commitment to *"supporting world-class discovery-driven research at all levels."*

Nevertheless, the **Canadian research enterprise is now at a crossroads**, and it is therefore most pertinent that the government asks for input to inform its future strategy. We cannot hide that there are very widespread concerns in the research community, since the continued investments, especially into the granting councils CIHR and NSERC, simply cannot keep up with the needs of the increased research capacity we have built over the last years. In a way, the government's science and technology policy risks to be a victim of its own success if we do not take the appropriate measures to build on our success.

**The most important issue is that the success rates at open operating grants competition of the granting councils CIHR and NSERC have been steadily eroding over the last years.** Also, important support mechanisms such as equipment grants have almost disappeared due to budgetary pressure. Just as an example, the success rate at the CIHR open operating grant competition was about 25% just a few years ago, reflecting a healthy competition for the best ideas ensuring that only excellent work is being funded. However, this has steadily eroded and dropped to just over 15% in the last competition and in addition, even the funded grants were all cut by 26.8%! This low success rate is getting close to the almost desperate situation at the National Institutes of Health and at the National Science Foundation implying that we have almost lost our competitive advantage that helped us attract researchers from the United States. The upcoming reforms of the CIHR open operating grant funding and peer review system further aggravate this situation by restraining the number of competitions in which researchers can submit their most innovative and competitive ideas for funding. Also, the mechanism of implementation of these reforms causes important funding gaps even for successful applications, which has led to widespread concerns in the scientific community. **As a consequence, there are dozens, if not hundreds of research laboratories across the country that have already contracted, will have to contract in the very near future and risk being closed down over the next few years.** Whereas researchers at many major research Universities appear still be able to compete in this environment, it is already clear that colleagues at many small and mid-sized Universities outside of the major urban centers are not able to sustain their activities at competitive levels. This is already leading to a loss of innovation and training capacity, to a loss of research capacity across the country so that costly CFI-funded equipment can not be used due to lack of operating funds.

Whereas the above may sound alarmist, we feel that it appropriately reflects the fragile situation in many University research laboratories across the country at this point. **Further, we wish to underline that it is not too late for the government to react and to avoid the contraction of research capacity and the loss of past investments.** The board of the CSMB proposes three concrete and feasible measures to address this situation in the following.

**First**, the upcoming Federal budgets will be crucial for the Canadian research enterprise and even modest 2% increases for the granting councils CIHR and NSERC, if targeted to the most innovative open operating grant competitions, would stop the downwards trend that we have experienced.

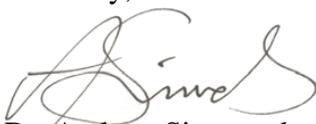
**Second**, the CFI should continue to play an important role to finance world-class infrastructure, but the reinstatement of the much more modest equipment funding programs at NSERC and CIHR would be equally important. These programs finance urgently needed renewal of ageing

infrastructure on a much broader scale that is not eligible for the CFI.

**Third**, we suggest that the indirect cost program should be gradually increased from the current 20% to reach 50% in 2017 in order to enable Universities to adequately support researchers in their mission. This increase may sound audacious, but it would coincide with the 150<sup>th</sup> birthday of our country, and it would very adequately show our vision of Canada's future as a nation of innovators dedicated to the generation of knowledge and of economic prosperity.

To conclude, we applaud the continued commitment of the Canadian government to world-class discovery-based research and its applications. Indeed, Canada must seize this moment! Nevertheless, as president of the CSMB speaking on behalf of the entire board of the society, I feel the need to communicate the concerns of our members that reflect the situation on the ground in our country. **We hope that the improving budgetary situation will enable modestly increased investments into the CIHR and NSERC, and sustained support for the CFI**, so that our researchers can reach their full potential continuing to do world-class research and innovation that will stimulate economic development and job creation across our nation and improve the health of Canadians. We thank you again for the opportunity to provide our input and for considering the views expressed in this letter.

Sincerely,



Dr. Andrew Simmonds  
President

- c.c. The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada  
The Honorable Jim Flaherty, Minister of Finance  
The Honourable Rona Ambrose, Minister of Health  
The Honorable Greg Rickford, Minister of State (Science and Technology)  
The Honorable Thomas Mulcair, Leader of the Official Opposition  
Kennedy Stewart, NDP Critic (Science and Technology)  
Laurin Lui, NDP Deputy Critic (Science and Technology)  
Justin Trudeau, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada  
Ted Hsu, Liberal Critic (Science and Technology)  
Dr. Janet Walden, Chief Operating Officer of NSERC  
Dr. Alain Beaudet, President of CIHR  
Dr. Gilles Patry, President and CEO of the CFI