

March 16th 2012

To: Roadmap-Plan.Strategique@irsc-cihr.gc.ca

From: Jacques Cote <jacques.cote@crhdq.ulaval.ca>

Subject: discussion on CIHR proposed reforms

Greetings,

I will briefly list the points raised in my analysis of the latest plan for reforms of the CIHR Research Grant program and peer-review process.

In the fall I participated in the discussion forum of the CIHR Institute of Genetics that was organized by its IAB in November in Montreal. It was clear even then that researchers were strongly opposed to this reform plan and most vehemently opposed to the new assessment process based on a virtual panel of examiners that convene only through internet, thus abolishing thematic peer review panels with face to face meetings.

In addition, I served on the evaluation committee of MCC in the fall competition, and moreover have served many times on peer review panels for both the CIHR and NCIC. In the fall committee, once again, researchers were greatly opposed to the reform plan suggested.

Finally, researchers in the Laval Cancer Research Center-CHUQ met this week to discuss the document amended on February 9, 2012. Again, a strong opposition was expressed.

The main criticisms of the new types of grant applications evaluated "by program" versus by "project" concerns the relative uncertainty of each type of portfolio and the feasibility of defining what exactly is comprised by a research program in relation to the different stages of a research career. There was also questioning about the ability to modify one's research program over time as well as on the stability of funding sources long term relative to the non-renewable project grants, including the so called high risk projects. The "seed grants" are already in place to fund high-risk projects. In addition, researchers have the impression that most should remain on grant type "project" versus "research program". The 2013-2014 transition seems impossible to predict and is certainly high-risk through the bumps/pitfalls/hesitations/poor decisions expected during initial identification of the two types of grants, their respective budget allocation and the simultaneous introduction of a new system of peer-review ... The feeling is that these reforms are mounted by administrators without the primary and majority involvement of researchers, and that the result is irreversible.

The argument of bias for established investigators in the current system according to us is false, given that our personal experiences on committees rather suggest the opposite, a less critical thrust towards applications for new researchers early in their career.

A thorough assessment in three steps, using largely a remote system by internet, is criticized by everyone due to the flaws and risks of such a system. We evaluate many requests for funds from international agencies this way and never put as much effort as we do into our critical review for a CIHR committee where we know that we must

present the application, along with its strengths and weaknesses, and defend our arguments in the presence of other committee members. The physical meeting currently proposed for only the last stage of the process is unfocused where only contentious issues will be discussed by a group of unspecialized researchers, unlike the current committees. The proposed amount of time required for assessment at the different steps are absolutely frightening, with times of only 30 minutes to 3 hours for each grant application. In the current system, a committee member spends at least one day to completely assess an application, ensuring a thorough evaluation and a well prepared critical review.

The real problem in the current system is the disparity between the committees at the level of scientific quality and the multitude of committees. This causes great injustice in funding between the various committees. It is clear that committees like BMB, MCC, G and Dev, to name a few, cover much of the best basic research in Canada but suffer horribly with the equal success rate imposed on all committees. We must realize which committees currently fund the leaders of biomedical research in Canada to clearly see the existing inequalities. The current situation leads to dilution and dispersion of financial resources, which are unfortunately capped by the government.

There is undoubtedly room for reform but certainly not according to the proposed plan. The system will always be faulty as it relies on the personal judgments of individuals. This is unavoidable. I think a dissatisfaction rate of 80% is absolutely not surprising given that the running success rate in competitions is currently around 17%. This cannot be taken as justification to install reforms but rather as a cry for help to increase budgets.

On the other hand, I do not believe there is a real "burden" on the evaluators. In the past, CIHR has certainly recruited researchers that were too young to serve on committees due to the reluctance of established researchers to get involved. This inexperience has negatively affected the careers of several Canadian scientists. It would be much more logical and effective to form committees with experienced researchers who feel indebted to CIHR for support of their research program. Having sat on several committees, I do not believe that the CIHR has made great efforts to involve more established researchers in the process of peer review. It should be an obligation and I know of many established researchers who have never been contacted and are ready to get involved.

In general, the proposed screening step with a letter of intent has been met with reluctance because it is almost impossible to make a scientifically informed judgment with the limited information provided at this stage. The researchers feel that CIHR use systems like CFI/GenomeCanada as models in their eagerness to reform within a stationary/diminishing budget ... Free biomedical research can not exist by only following the business-like model of these organizations.

That is essentially what I would like to convey to the CIHR and to Dr. Beaudet. I sent a similar message to the university and I will be present during Dr. Beaudet's visit on campus on March 20.

Thank you,

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and
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E-mail sent to CIHR following Dr. Beaudet's visit to Laval University (March 29th):

To: Roadmap-Plan.Strategique@cihr-irsc.gc.ca
From: Jacques Cote <jacques.cote@crhdq.ulaval.ca>
Subject: an important question I forgot to mention...

During Dr. Beaudet's visit to Laval University last week I forgot to bring up a question...

If the proposed reforms deal in part with creating a research program grant system for the small number of highly successful PIs who currently holds 2/3 and more CIHR grants, I wonder if anybody made an analysis of where these PIs get their funding, meaning on which peer-review committee. I suspect that these highly successful PIs are in fact funded by a very limited number of specific panels. These panels deal with very high standard research projects and function in a very thorough and ethical manner (more than a day to review a grant for each grant for each reviewer; not only 3 hrs as proposed...). Because the top PIs are getting funded on these specific panels, this leads to many excellent grants being not funded because of being on these high standard panels. So if a goal is to take these top-notch researchers out of the normal grant competition, it should significantly increase success in apparent funding of a limited number of specific panels.

Thus, creating a grant program for Top researchers while keeping the original program intact should favor higher funding where the science is stronger on specific panels... That does not sound like a bad idea... no need to reform the entire system... just take the Top ones in a separate class.

This way, more of the best science is funded while not de facto changing the flat success rate throughout the panels...

Can somebody check which panels fund the PIs who hold multiple CIHR grants?

Also, it was highly surprising to hear Dr. Beaudet doubting that panel members pass at least a day on each grant they have to review. Maybe that is not the case on the non-historical more recent panels but it is certainly the case on panels like MCC, BMB, G and other very strong and classical ones that support basic research.

Looking forward to hear how CIHR will deal with its 30\$M budget cut over the next 2 years...

Thanks,
Jacques