



**The Canadian Society of  
Biochemistry, Molecular  
& Cellular Biology**

**La Société Canadienne de  
Biochimie, et de Biologie  
Moléculaire & Cellulaire**

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September 4, 2007

RE: Internal Review of the Discovery Grant Program  
Grant Selection Committee Structure Review

Dear Colleague,

I am writing on behalf of the Canadian Society of Biochemistry, Molecular and Cellular Biology (CSBMCB) to offer comment in response to NSERC's call for input on the above reviews .

CSBMCB members include Professors at Canadian universities, Research Scientists at hospital research institutes and government labs as well as trainees and technical staff at these institutions. These Canadian biochemists, molecular and cell biologists carry out extraordinary research and education activities in the life sciences that impact directly on health care and the economic well-being of Canadians.

The activities of CSBMCB members have a very high dependence on federal government granting programs and thus considerable and measurable benefit to Canadians can come from effective delivery of these funds. A variety of government and granting programs exist that deliver funds to CSBMCB researchers through a diversity of funding mechanisms. Many of our members hold NSERC Discovery grants that fund research in the basic sciences not covered by the mandate of CIHR and other funding agencies.

With respect to the specific questions posed for the 'Internal Review of the Discovery Grant Program' and of the Grant Selection Committee I offer the following:

1. CSBMCB members place a very high value on HQP and NSERC is well-regarded as an agency that places a premium on supporting HQP. Undergraduate and graduate support programs go a long way to supporting the best and brightest.
2. Recognizing the objectives of promoting a diversified base of research and fostering excellence, it is safe to say that many

CSBMCB members are dissatisfied with the NSERC Discovery program. This program is widely perceived to be one that goes too far toward the goal of funding a diversified base of researchers and with insufficient regard for excellence. Success rate in the neighborhood of 80 % are simply not in line with national or international standards of quality in grant funding.

3. On balance, our membership believes that NSERC Discovery grants are too small to have significant impact and to make NSERC-funded researchers competitive internationally. The problem is clearly particularly acute in the Life Sciences where research costs are especially expensive. The success rate issue is, of course, closely linked to the grant size predicament. NSERC is perceived by many as providing small amounts of research funding to such a broad base that it has failed to identify and sufficiently reward the brightest lights in Canadian science. Thus NSERC should lower success rates, increase grant sizes and use excellence as the primary criterion for awarding funds.
4. CSBMCB members are very concerned about what is clearly an 'uneven playing field' for researchers in the Life Sciences compared to those in the Physical Sciences. In the most recent competition, success rates for new applicants, for example, to panels 32 and 33, which fund many of our members, were far lower than for the overall competition. This is simply unacceptable. We call on NSERC to allocate funds as a fraction of applications received and to use excellence as the over-riding measure to do so.
5. Finally, an important point to make here is that our members understand the importance of a strong funding base for basic research. Indeed, CSBMCB members have seen an erosion in recent years of funding for "non-targeted" research. Thus we believe that any changes to the NSERC Discovery grant system must retain this mandate. A quote by Arthur Kornberg, a luminary in biochemical research, recipient of the 1959 Nobel Prize in Medicine and an outspoken proponent of investigator-driven research, sums up this position: "...major advances - x-rays, penicillin, polio vaccine, and genetic engineering - have come from the efforts of individual scientists to understand nature, unrelated to any practical objective. Basic research has been the province of the individual investigator and remains the lifeline of medicine."

I thank you very much for the opportunity to provide feedback and I look forward to the recommendations of the review process.

Sincerely,



Eric Brown  
Past-President of the CSBMCB