



Dr. Alain Beaudet, President and
Dr. Jane Aubin, Chief Scientific Officer and Vice-President, Research
Canadian Institutes of Health Research
160 Elgin Street, 9th Floor
Ottawa, ON K1A 0W9

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Dear Drs. Aubin and Beaudet,

I am writing on behalf of the colleagues who have co-signed this letter to respond to the planning document released on February 9th, 2012. My colleagues and I have a vested interest in helping CIHR achieve the best possible results with the available resources because we have received critical support throughout our careers and have provided many years of service as panel members and reviewers. I have personally served three full terms as a panel member and provided numerous additional reviews, going back to the time I was recruited to UBC in 1984. The main topics we address are:

1. Funding

The most critical and central problem is that the tremendous investments and successes of recruitment and infrastructure programs have not been matched by corresponding increases in operating support, particularly with the broadened mandate of CIHR. We agree that it will be beneficial to simplify the open suite but it is also important to re-assess the balance between targeted and truly competitive open opportunities.

2. Peer Review

While we agree that changes to the peer review system could be implemented to streamline the process, we take issue with the specific approaches suggested, in particular with the multi-stage and "remote" reviews. Reviewer fatigue can be addressed with streamlined applications and the use of pre-panel triage (but based on full applications). A college of reviewers could be used to populate and assist standing panels, the number of which could be consolidated.

3. Program changes

Special consideration for the very best researchers, as well as for new investigators is desirable but directing as much as 45% of the operating pool to "elite" investigators could seriously jeopardize the project stream.

4. Time to plan and implement major decisions

We urge CIHR to allow sufficient time to evaluate feedback, modify plans and run suitable pilots.

We want to help with implementation of constructive changes and we trust that CIHR will take the time needed to assess and utilize feedback.

1. Funding.

We are concerned that the proposals described in the February 9th CIHR document will

fail to address the critical general problem that the CIHR funding envelope is insufficient to adequately "fuel" the expanded CIHR mandate. Recruitment of outstanding scientists has been extremely successful (CRC, CERC, postdoctoral and graduate scholarships, etc.), as has been the investment in infrastructure (CFI). In contrast, insufficient progress in operating support means that the research community has substantial additional potential that will be wasted in the absence of adequate operating support. We understand the financial strictures faced by CIHR and we want to help CIHR in its attempts to optimize the use of funding and to ensure that the research community can at least maintain its current level of excellence. We also understand that the community must take on responsibilities to achieve this outcome.

We accept that all four pillars are crucial yet each has its own requirements and challenges. In particular, we urge CIHR to establish realistic estimates of the funding that is required for each of the four pillars to be adequately supported. It is also crucial to examine the possibility that review procedures for one pillar may not be appropriate for all.

Fundamental arguments that seem surprisingly poorly appreciated at the level of the federal government include the remarkable value of investment in CIHR, the fact that funding has a powerful multiplier effect through training, salaries and consequent economic spin-off and, most critically, that Canadian science is widely considered to give among the highest bang for the buck based on international comparisons. Many success stories that link basic science to economic spin-offs and positive outcomes for healthcare can be documented and maybe we are still doing a poor job of promoting such successes and we all need to help in this regard.

2. Peer Review

We believe the proposed changes to the peer review system are problematic and potentially counter-productive. We have little enthusiasm for "remote" (on-line) review. Although not without problems, the face-to-face panels (that, incidentally, have NOT been rejected by NIH as hinted) are still the best method we know of to ensure accountable and effective review. Triage based on a short and therefore superficial LOI is anathema to fair appraisal and we fear that many great ideas will be ignored for lack of effective review and discussion. At the same time, experience suggests that the LOI stage will invite a flood of "shotgun-type" applications that would add to, rather than reduce the burden of review. Finally, it seems entirely possible that the more complex multi-stage review will lengthen the entire process between submission and decision. We note that NSERC has also undergone a significant change in their review process, while still maintaining panel meetings.

The college of reviewers is a great concept but why not use it to provide the pool from which conventional panels can be populated? The Chairs and SO's could assemble their panels from this college based on the topics of the grants in each competition. The number of panels should be carefully reviewed and consolidated. To increase participation by reviewers, especially those with greatest experience, it is entirely possible to use both carrots and sticks - you lose a year of funding if you decline to participate and you gain an extra year if you serve. Although those are extreme scenarios, similar ideas might work within the current review system at little extra cost.

With 3,000 designated PI's in the CIHR system, we should be well equipped to overcome "fatigue", particularly if the number and complexity of applications being "recycled" through the system is reduced by other proposed changes. It is common for NIH study sections to engage external reviewers, including by teleconference, to complement the expertise of the section. If it is assumed that classical external review is not workable, then such direct external input provides

an option that is highly accountable yet flexible.

3. Program changes

We strongly agree that reducing the complexity of funding opportunities is highly desirable and that re-directing funds to an operating core (be it programs plus projects as described, or some other mechanism) is a positive step. In addition, we urge a re-direction of funds from the numerous and often specialized "targeted" programs to the open competitive operating grants program. History has proved time and again that great scientific advances result in unanticipated ways from fundamental, discovery based research. The current bias towards directed programs ensures that many investigators, particularly in fields bridging traditional disciplines, are effectively ineligible to apply for a substantial fraction of the total funding.

We agree with the policy statement in that it is desirable to have incentives for the "top" researchers, a discrete entry passage into the funding system for new investigators, and recognition of "high risk" proposals. All of these features can be achieved by allowing each review panel latitude and discretion in accordance with its specific research area. It will be important even for well-supported PI's to retain the flexibility to change direction, of course. To maintain the number of independent PI's and to avoid a two-tiered system of funding, we feel that the proportion of those accorded larger and longer-term programmatic support must be carefully considered. The "modeling" that has evidently been done to build the current proposal for funding levels should be described more transparently. Incidentally, we do NOT agree that experienced investigators are necessarily risk-averse.

A related concern we share with CIHR is the complexity and length of grant applications. This could easily be mitigated by simplification of the application form. For example, it should be feasible to simplify the CV to about 4 pages of the most recent and relevant information, limit the number of figures and tables allowed in appendices, cut out the appended manuscripts (we can all access most key journals with a click of the mouse) and simplify the budget (i.e. use steps of \$20k and eliminate the repetitive yearly budgets when most grants are awarded at one fixed per annum amount). It would also help to streamline instructions to applicants and reviewers, which currently are distributed over numerous on-line links.

4. Time to plan and implement major decisions

We want to make it clear we are on the same "side" as CIHR. We urge you to take feedback seriously and allow sufficient time for further debate and suitable trials before making such major policy decisions.

Yours sincerely,

Roger Brownsey, Ph.D.
Professor and Head
Biochemistry and Molecular Biology

Cc: Janice Eng, Howard Feldman, John Hepburn, Gavin Stuart and Simon Peacock

UBC Department of Biochemistry & Molecular Biology
Signatories

<p>Gary Brayer, Ph.D. Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>	<p>Dieter Bromme, Ph.D. Professor & Canada Research Chair Centre for Blood Research Oral Biological and Medical Sciences Associate Member Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>
<p>George Mackie, Ph.D. Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>	<p>Lawrence McIntosh, Ph.D. Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Chemistry Associate Member Michael Smith Laboratories</p>
<p>Chris Overall, Ph.D. Professor & Canada Research Chair Centre for Blood Research Oral Biological and Medical Sciences Associate Member Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>	<p>Michel Roberge, Ph.D. Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Scientific Director Centre for Drug Research and Development</p>
<p>Ivan Sadowski, Ph.D. Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>	<p>Elizabeth Conibear, Ph.D. Associate Professor Centre for Molecular Medicine and Therapeutics Medical Genetics Associate Member Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>
<p>Franck Duong, Ph.D. Associate Professor & Canada Research Chair Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>	<p>LeAnn Howe, Ph.D. Associate Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>

<p>Eric Jan, Ph.D. Associate Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology CIHR Investigator MSFHR Career Investigator</p>	<p>Christian Kastrup, Ph.D. Assistant Professor Michael Smith Laboratories Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Associate Member Biomedical Engineering Program</p>
<p>Thibault Mayor, Ph.D. Assistant Professor CHiBi - Centre for High-Throughput Biology Biochemistry and Molecular Biology CIHR Investigator</p>	<p>Vivien Measday, Ph.D. Assistant Professor & Canada Research Chair Wine Research Centre Faculty of Land and Food Systems Associate Member Michael Smith Laboratories Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>
<p>Masayuki Numata, Ph.D. Assistant Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>	<p>Filip Van Petegem, Ph.D. Assistant Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology CIHR Investigator MSFHR Career Investigator</p>
<p>Calvin Yip, Ph.D. Assistant Professor Biochemistry and Molecular Biology MSFHR Career Investigator</p>	