



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

20 April 2012

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Dr. Alain Beaudet
President, Canadian Institutes of Health Research
Ottawa, Canada

Dr. Jane Aubin
Chief Scientific Officer/Vice-President, Research, CIHR
Ottawa Canada

Dear Drs Beaudet and Aubin:

On behalf of the membership of the Canadian Society of Molecular Biosciences (CSMB), we thank Dr. Aubin for presenting an update on the status of the CIHR proposed reforms of open programs and peer review at our recent Annual General Meeting in Whistler, British Columbia held on March 15, 2012.

Dr. Aubin's presentation clarified several concerns that had been voiced, and provided an update on the evolving restructuring plans at CIHR. However, our Society, which comprises over 1000 members, remains concerned about the inadequate funding for investigator initiated health research through open peer-reviewed competitions. It has been disheartening to watch our colleagues with internationally competitive and productive programs not receiving CIHR grant support and forced to scale back or even close their research operations. In the recent Federal Budget, CIHR was spared cuts, with no net change in CIHR's annual budget, although some \$15M was moved into the strategic initiative SPOR. We also understand that of the approximate \$700M annual budget allocated to grant funding, 30% is top-down funding (strategic) and 70% for the open competition (investigator driven).

With grant numbers being capped at around 400 grants for several operating grant competitions and the CIHR annual budget not changing, more excellent scientists will lose their grant support in the coming years. To reverse this trend and to mitigate the long term damage to Canada's reputation as an innovative nation, we propose the following:

1. That CIHR revise the distribution of the budget such that a minimum of 80% of the research grant funds be allocated to the open competition.

There has been considerable debate about the proposed revision of the peer review. Many of our society members have lengthy records of serving on the peer review panels. We realize that it is a major commitment of our time, but we believe that the current system is providing a fair review of applications. That is not to say that the current peer review is ideal. But at the core of this current system are face-to-face meetings, which we all believe are fundamental to a fair and honest review. We are united in our opinion that the proposed revision in the peer review process is not tenable. The multistep mix of virtual independent reviews culminating with face-to-face review will miss the dynamics afforded in face-to-face reviews of a more limited number of grants and will increase the likelihood of potentially excellent grants being culled without the fair in depth discussions that occur using the current format. Furthermore, the proposed system dissects different components of the application which may be viewed quite differently in its entirety rather than when presented in stages. The concept that one can separate proposed ideas and the applicant's credentials during the review process is untenable in our view. We are all seasoned reviewers and it is central to our evaluation process that we assess both the ideas and the capability of the applicant to carry them out.

Our second serious concern relates to reviewer burden. The proposed reforms are intended to reduce reviewer burden but the opposite is clearly the case. Having 5-8 expert reviewers at the first two stages of review, plus additional reviewers at Stage 3, represents a drastic increase in reviewer demands. This is clear simply by comparing the current process involving 3 reviewers per grant (primary, secondary and reader) to the proposed process of 5-8 reviews per grant x 2 stages. Assuming that the number of available reviewers does not change, this represents a 3- to 5-fold increase in the number of applications per reviewer! Alternatively, 3 to 5 times as many reviewers will be required - where will they be found? The estimated times for review at stages 1 and 2 are also not realistic, particularly factoring in "virtual discussion" time for each grant. In our view, highly competent reviews can be obtained with 3 expert reviewers.

2. That CIHR reject the proposed peer review process and work with the scientific community and perhaps with other health research funders (your partners) in creating a peer review process that is fair, effective and efficient.

Regardless of the nature of the reforms instituted, they must be rolled out slowly in the form of pilot projects. This will ensure early detection of problems and the incorporation of solutions. For example, staged review could be implemented in the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 competitions for grants submitted to just 2 or 3 panels.

We acknowledge that receiving feedback on the proposed reforms is important for CIHR. We have responded to this call. To inform CIHR and our membership, CSMB has posted responses from our membership and the broader biomedical community to the CIHR proposed reforms of open programs and peer review (<http://www.csbmcb.ca/>). We are hopeful that CIHR will appropriately respond to the concerns sent in numerous letters to CSMB and to CIHR. It is essential that CIHR continue to engage the health research community in a meaningful way as it moves forward with fundamental reforms to the open operating grants program and peer review.

In closing, the CSMB has put forward two proposals. We await your response to our recommendations to share with our membership.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Davie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a distinct "D".

Jim Davie, PhD
President, CSMB