



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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

April 2nd, 2012

Dear Dr. Beaudet,

We are writing as current and former CIHR-funded researchers in the Life Sciences Institute at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. While we appreciate the concerted efforts to improve the quality of science funded by the CIHR, we have a number of serious concerns with the proposed changes and their implementation. We would argue that it is a red herring to say that the research community is most dissatisfied with the current review process. Instead, what the community is truly dissatisfied with is the fact that excellent grants are consistently not being funded, often through multiple cycles.

Unfortunately, what is being proposed in the CIHR document does not address the fundamental problem that has led to this, which is that there is currently not enough money being allocated for basic research from within the current CIHR budget envelope. Furthermore, after carefully reading the proposal document together with the recent external review, and participating in the March 16th Townhall at UBC, we have concluded that many aspects of the current proposal will actually exacerbate this fundamental problem, which is fast becoming a crisis for basic biomedical research in Canada. Below we point out some of the more glaring aspects of the proposal in this regard and we make suggestions that we believe would significantly alleviate a number of the most pressing issues that have arisen due to the underfunding.

- 1. Proposal to institute a two-tiered operating grant system:** This is an artificial and untenable construct. We have concerns that this is an attempt to set up an HHMI-type system within the current investigator-driven operating grant envelope. While we see the merit in having such a system in Canada, it would need to be a separate, and separately funded, program. Specifically, such an approach to funding research within the CIHR will set up a system of haves and have-nots in foundational Canadian biomedical science that will cripple our ability to consistently produce high quality 'knowledge generating proposals' as the International Review Panel (IRP) called them. In addition, under the two-tiered scenario proposed, we are extremely concerned that excellent young investigators will be constantly chasing short-term dollars and thus will be unable to expand their programs to the point where they can engage in long-term, in-depth projects to generate data of true impact. Short-term faddish grants are not a route to building successful infrastructure, nor future scientific expertise. *Our suggestion:* Build flexibility into the current system such that panels are able to recognize an investigator's progress along a continuum that includes the two extreme 'ends' currently proposed. In particular, extend grant cycle length to seven years where warranted for some long-term projects. This could be facilitated within the current system by clustering grant panels into sub-groups that share expertise and reviewers to increase information flow and facilitate high quality decision-making.

2. **Concerns over the budget for the investigator-driven research program:** We were surprised to learn at the Town Hall held on the UBC campus that no rigorous analysis has been undertaken of all 12 of the CIHR programs to determine their relative effectiveness given the focus of the proposed changes on the investigator-driven operating grant program. Regardless, we very much agree with the following statement from the IRP which can be found on pg 12 of their 2005-2010 external review:

*"... The IRP supports such an approach (to defining strategic initiatives), provided it does not encroach upon, but synergizes and further enables investigator-initiated research funding, which should remain the mainstay of Canadian research, as it has proven itself to be a core reason for the success of Canadian research on a worldwide basis. **The stated balance of 70/30 for investigator-initiated and targeted research is a good one - but only as long as, of the 70% dedicated to so-called bottom-up research, a large percentage supports new knowledge generating proposals as opposed to applied research...**"*

We believe, that, together with the current historically low funding rates, the proposed program changes will actually reduce the percentage support for knowledge generating proposals.

Our suggestion: As described above, we are already facing a crisis in funding for newly emerging and mid-level researchers. If we lose them from the system now we will lose the future of basic research in Canada. We suggest setting a funding rate 'floor' for investigator-driven research/knowledge-generating proposals (e.g. 20% success rate). If rates fall below that floor, correct the situation by shifting strategic funding to operating grants. This would require no overall increase in the CIHR funding envelope, but it would protect the large investment Canada has made in new investigators, both in terms of their recruitment and their infrastructure costs that have greatly increased innovation as well as capacity nationwide. We suggest that this policy be adopted immediately before things become even more dire.

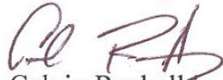
3. **Proposed changes to the peer review system:** In our opinion the proposed changes in peer review will decrease the quality of the process dramatically by decreasing reviewer accountability and by separating the applicant's track record from the grant application content. This will increase the arbitrary nature of many funding decisions which will result in hidden bias that will very likely go uncorrected over numerous grant cycles. Most importantly, we do not agree that the proposed changes will reduce reviewer burden. In fact, based on the numbers presented so far, and in the absence of detailed modeling, we conclude that it will very likely increase the burden. Our suggestion: Bring more reviewers onto the grant panels, particularly current grant holders with seniority and expertise right now. This can be done immediately by offering concrete inducements (eg. modestly extended funding periods) for those who consistently serve as reviewers.
4. **Modeling the specifics of the proposed changes to CIHR programs:** We are very concerned, again based on what we were told at the UBC Townhall, that so little has been done in this regard so far. We agree with the statement that, "*the devil is in the details*" as we were also told at the Townhall. Both those who are 'pro' and 'con' in regard to the proposed changes agree that they are drastic. So, given that, why is there such a rush, and why has there been so little meaningful consultation with those who will be most affected? Our suggestion: Extend the timelines for making foundational decisions about new programs significantly to allow for the generation of specific models that can then be presented to the entire research committee such that constructive feedback can be gathered, carefully considered, and, where warranted, included in revised models.

In conclusion, from discussions we have had with biomedical researchers at UBC and across the country it would appear that CIHR constituents are very disturbed by the current proposal. Furthermore, many amongst us have come to the conclusion that the current proposal misses the point with respect to what is most needed to facilitate high-quality biomedical research in Canada. We would hope that our comments and suggestions above, as well as the comments and suggestions we know our colleagues from across the country are sending your way, will help us all to come back to that crucial, fundamental point.

All cosignatories have agreed to the contents of this letter.



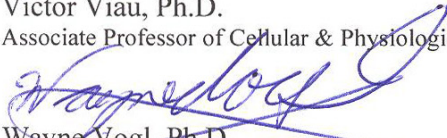
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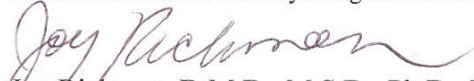
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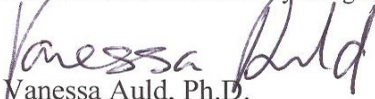
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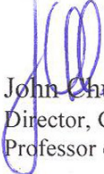
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