

## Creation of the CIHR: A Genuine Transformation in Health Research

**The Government of Canada** has pledged to make this country one of the most innovative in the world. Health research is at the core of innovation. Indeed, as the government has observed, “as the 21st century unfolds, the health sector is emerging as the largest and most important driver of the global economy.”

Our health system is Canada's largest knowledge-based industry, employing thousands of Canadians and with expenditures in excess of \$103 billion. Given the current scientific revolution in our understanding of health and disease, health research will comprise an ever-larger proportion of total research and development activity in Canada and throughout the world.

The federal government recognizes these research opportunities – and has consistently invested in the people, projects and infrastructure that together make up the health research enterprise. The creation of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) on June 7, 2000, has launched a genuine transformation in health research in Canada. With a broad vision and a mandate to excel in the creation of new knowledge right across the health research spectrum and to turn research into action, CIHR is moving quickly across all aspects of our mandate.

In the 2002 Speech from the Throne, the Government of Canada pledged long-term investments in health to be outlined in the upcoming federal budget; increased funding to the federal granting councils; and plans to work with universities to address the issue of indirect costs involved in research. The Speech from the Throne also highlighted the priority of young people creating opportunities for Canada's children, the health gap of our Aboriginal communities and fetal alcohol syndrome. These are all areas that CIHR and its 13 Institutes are addressing through both the open competitions and our strategic initiatives.

Hospitals are critical partner institutions with CIHR in both major aspects of our mission: funding outstanding research, and turning that research into action. Together, we promote better health, a stronger healthcare system and an engine for economic growth. As the largest and most visible institutions within the healthcare system, hospitals also bear the heaviest responsibility for delivering health services. With the report of the Romanow Commission and the National Summit of the Innovation Agenda both due this fall, a window of opportunity is opening up for the healthcare system in general and hospitals in particular.

Our collective responsibility is to demonstrate to government that health and the healthcare system can move beyond waiting lists and emergency room crises and evolve into an evidence-based, innovative system that provides the best care

for Canadians in the most cost-effective manner. CIHR has recommended that the Government of Canada select innovation in health and health research as a keystone of its Innovation Strategy.

Canadians care deeply about their healthcare system, and they support a publicly funded system that provides universal access to those who need it, not only to those who can afford it. But they worry about its sustainability in these times of increasing demands. Research provides the capacity to innovate, to make the changes that will keep our system sustainable. Research provides the raw material for innovation in clinical treatments. It provides the capacity to monitor and evaluate new clinical, managerial and system approaches as they are developed and applied.

Health research leads to a fundamentally new understanding of health and disease that saves both lives and money. It is the key to our healthcare system. If Canada is to succeed in harnessing new ideas and technology emerging from research and to ensure a cost-effective healthcare system that meets the needs of Canadians, we must be committed to innovation in health research.

Eighty-five percent of Canadians agree that the future quality of our healthcare is directly related to the commitment we make today to invest in health and medical research.

Canadian governments have not hesitated to support and promote our resource-based industries and our technologically based sectors such as aerospace and information technology. Now is the time to make the same solid investment in our most important resource – a healthy population and a strong healthcare system that can be the foundation of Canada's knowledge-based economy.

- Innovation in health research means turning research into:
- Effective healthcare products and services through commercial activities and technology transfer to the industrial sector.
  - Improved health delivery and health maintenance through professional education in partnership with healthcare delivery organizations and the caring professions.
  - Changes in health-related policies in collaboration with federal, provincial and territorial governments and their health, education, social services, justice and environmental agencies.
  - Better individual and community health practices, achieved by working with the media, health charities and local health and educational authorities.
  - A stronger, diversified economy where Canada derives both health and wealth from our investments in health and health research.

In today's knowledge-based economy, however, it is not enough just to generate research. We need to ensure that the knowledge we generate is exported from the lab or office to the marketplace or community. This is where new ideas are turned into products, practices and policies that improve the health and quality of life of Canadians.

CIHR is facilitating this movement, through programs such as our Proof of Principle program (POP), which is designed to improve the efficiency of the transfer of knowledge and technology resulting from the research we fund. The program enables universities or researchers to license or start up a company with a higher valuation.

Thanks to a POP grant, Dr. Geoffrey Fernie, from Toronto's Sunnybrook and Women's Health Sciences Centre, will take his concept of stair safety among seniors to its next stage of development. Dr. Fernie is completing a clinical evaluation of his novel LifeRail – and preparing a market analysis to facilitate its transfer to industry.

The CIHR Small-Medium Enterprise (SME) Program is a partnership between CIHR and Canadian biotechnology companies to stimulate the research of start-ups, hospital and university spin-offs. Dr. Michel Tremblay is using his CIHR/SME grant to work in partnership with Dr. Morag Park and Kinetek Pharmaceuticals to validate novel targets for the development of new cancer gene inhibitors.

Hospitals are ideally positioned to take advantage of the federal government's commitment to research and innovation. Hospitals are the interface between the community and the healthcare system, the meeting-place for patients, practitioners, policy-makers – and profiteers. Hospitals can be beacons of innovation in the healthcare system, delivering not just babies, but new ideas and patents that lead to wealth and a cost-effective healthcare system.

Together, CIHR and Canada's hospitals can align our visions, as well as our strategies and programs, to demonstrate to the government that health, healthcare, health research and hospitals are key players in the future economic prosperity and social well-being of our country.

#### About the Author

**Dr. Alan Bernstein** is CIHR's inaugural President and former Director of the Samuel Lunenfeld Research Institute at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital. He is a respected teacher, author and pioneering researcher in the fields of cancer, hematopoiesis and genomics. He has received numerous awards for his contributions, including the McLaughlin Medal of the Royal Society of Canada, and is a recent inductee into the Order of Canada.

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