



CAN-ACN

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR NEUROSCIENCE
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES NEUROSCIENCES

Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity Subcommittee

May 15th 2020

RE: Response to CIHR cancellation of Spring Project Grant Competition.

Dear Dr. Michael Strong, President of CIHR

The Canadian Association for Neuroscience (CAN) Equity Diversity and Inclusivity Committee was disappointed to hear of the decision to cancel the Spring competition. We understand that the decision was made after consultation with many stakeholders, and was not made lightly. However, as a community of brain health researchers we are concerned, and would like to strongly encourage you to consider reinstating the competition for the following reasons:

CIHR funds the majority of health-related research in Canada. Cancelling competitions has immense long-term consequences not just for the science itself, but also for our economy, educational systems, and international leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it crystal clear that we need to invest more, not less, in fundamental health research and that this needs to happen consistently so that we are not scrambling at the last minute to solve urgent problems. However, cancellations and delays to 4 competitions over the past 5 years, combined with historically low success rates, have led to a substantial reduction in health-related research in our country, including the temporary or permanent shutdown of labs across Canada.

Science and research cannot be stopped and picked up again without significant costs. For example, the talented staff who are the engine of research in this country—including technicians and undergraduate, graduate and postdoctoral fellows—need to be paid. If researchers cannot access research funds, which are essential for almost all of these salaries, these outstanding scientists will lose their jobs and will understandably start to turn away from the uncertain future in research.

Cancellation of yet another competition will only exacerbate these short- and long-term consequences. Beyond the economic and social impacts on Canada of a shaky health research ecosystem, cancellation of another competition will also affect the ability of Canadians to compete in the global research community.

The repercussions from this decision will have a disproportionate, negative impact on underrepresented groups—including women and racialized people—and early career researchers, which works against recent important and commendable attempts to advance equity, diversity and inclusivity in the Canadian research community.

The cancellation of the spring competition has devastating consequences to early career researchers that are getting their programs off the ground. This delays their ability to hire trainees and staff, minimizes their ability to perform research and puts them at an unfair disadvantage when the granting competition reopens. Furthermore, the number of resubmissions necessary is not equally distributed among underrepresented groups and will disproportionately affect our researchers that fall into these categories. This will be exaggerated by COVID-19, as data are starting to indicate that certain groups—in particular those without caring responsibilities—will be able to take advantage of the time during lockdown to increase their productivity (e.g., by writing new grant applications for the Fall competition), contributing to cumulative disadvantages for other groups. Although CIHR has recognized that early career

researchers will be disproportionately affected, it is also important to recognize that those from under-represented groups will also be impacted.

The cancellation, paired with instability of CIHR funding competitions over the past 5 years, has significantly reduced researchers', trainees', and the public's confidence in the Canadian research ecosystem.

CIHR reforms over the 2010-2016 period led to ineffective review processes and created inequities in the system. This led to a lack in confidence of the Canadian scientific community in our primary health-related research funding agency. CIHR listened to the community in 2017, and positive changes since that time have gone a long way toward restoring confidence. However, cancelling this competition after researchers, trainees and staff had already dedicated numerous hours toward the submitted applications (~ \$30M CAD in person hours) has taken us backwards, once again leading to a perception of lack of respect from CIHR for the scientific community that it serves.

While it is true that the applications may still be reviewed in the fall competition, the reduction to one application cycle in 2020 will weaken the research community in Canada. While we applaud the decision to give a cost extension to those with grants ending in the next 8 months, the inability to apply in the Fall hampers many researchers. Because it is impossible for committees to discriminate between the top 25% of applications—at that level they are all excellent and well above the funding bar—in the era of 15% success rates, most researchers have to submit grant applications multiple times.

The logistics around running the competition remotely are manageable.

The academic community has rapidly adapted to the COVID-19 situation by embracing online teleconferencing and other platforms for teaching and research meetings including large scientific conferences. Other international (e.g., National Institutes of Health and European Research Council) and national (Brain Canada) funding agencies are running competitions that are effectively face-to-face via Zoom. And on April 23rd CIHR launched a competition for COVID-19 focused Operating Grants that had over 1800 applications, indicating that CIHR has now found a way to run face-to-face review remotely.

In addition, the CAN community is very willing to contribute to the process, and to make up for any reduction in capacity of CIHR staff due to a shift to other federal priorities. For this competition, peer review committees were already engaged and feedback from our community indicates that Chairs, Scientific Officers and other committee members would be happy to take on additional workload to take the competition forward.

CAN Equity Diversity and Inclusivity Committee would like to strongly encourage CIHR to consider reinstating the competition.

In sum, the CAN community agrees that the evidence is strongly in favour of running the Spring competition (albeit delayed). It is not too late, we are happy to put in the work, and the community will thank you. It will also go a long way in restoring our confidence in CIHR.

We also support Holly Witteman and Jim Woodgett's suggestions to guarantee the next 3 funding cycles, carry forward early career investigator status by a year, extend all grant amounts for salaries and trainees and allow for greater nominated principal applicant grant limits in the fall for those that submitted in the spring 2020 competition.

Lastly, we urge CIHR to recognize that while COVID-19 research is currently of the essence, it would be a serious mistake to abandon all other health research. The extent of the health

ramifications from COVID-19 are unknown, making research in other areas of health (such as mental health which is a focus for our organization), not directly related to the immediate effects of COVID-19, of paramount importance. We do not know where the next major discovery will come from and what sphere of health research may provide the missing puzzle piece required for a new vaccine, or a measure to combat negative mental health issues created by social isolation. And in spite of the immediate threat caused by COVID-19, major unrelated health issues continue to independently have an impact on society. Neglecting these now will lead to bigger problems in the future.

All areas of health research are needed now more than ever. Moreover, we are certain that our community, and the broader health research community in Canada, will rally behind the CIHR to make this a successful competition, and to assist in all aspects of the delayed Spring 2020 competition.

Signed,

CAN Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity Committee