

# Hypothesis: The Research Page

## Funding protected time for research

### *New opportunities from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research*

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The creation of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) in 2000 enhanced opportunities for funding research in family medicine. The CIHR mandate goes well beyond the traditional creation of new knowledge to include development of more effective health services and products and translation of new knowledge into better health for Canadians.

The CIHR emphasis on a multidisciplinary approach to solving our nation's health care problems suits family medicine well, offering us opportunities to collaborate with a variety of researchers from social sciences and other health professions. Funding can be sought for specific project costs (operating grants) or for research training and salary support (personnel awards). This article is specifically directed at people seeking support for training or a career in research, and to department heads or chairs of faculty development committees whose responsibilities include helping these researchers meet that goal.

In the first competition for operating grants held under the auspices of the CIHR, family medicine investigators achieved remarkable success.<sup>1</sup> The lack of similar success in the personnel awards competition must be reversed. "Capacity building" is a great challenge for family medicine<sup>2</sup> and essential to our growth as an academic discipline. We do not have the long-established research tradition of our Royal College specialist colleagues and must work hard to catch up by promoting research careers for today's students and, simultaneously, for current faculty struggling with teaching and clinical care loads. I will highlight several training and salary options relevant to our discipline, but anyone interested in more detail should refer to the funding opportunities guide on the CIHR website.<sup>3</sup> I will conclude with a few suggestions for applicants, gleaned from my experience sitting on a salary awards panel for three competition cycles.

#### **Training and early salary support**

Three research personnel programs seem ideally suited to family medicine residents or physicians early in their careers who are considering doing research. A current faculty appointment is not required for three options: Fellowships, Senior Research Fellowships, and Clinician Scientists. Fellowships provide support for engaging in research either in Canada or abroad, and applicants may be (but are not required to be) in a Master's or Doctorate program. Fellowships offer \$35 000 to \$45 000 per year, plus an annual research allowance of \$3500.

Senior Research Fellowships are available to physicians who have already completed at least 2 years of research training after receiving their medical degree and who have been identified by their institutions as having strong potential to become independent investigators. The first phase (training) offers a stipend for up to 2 years of \$49 000 per year and a research allowance of \$10 000. The second phase (salary support) is also available for 2 years, contributing \$50 000 annually to salary and offering a research allowance of \$40 000 annually.

The third award in this category is Clinician Scientist, available to people who have been identified by a Canadian medical school as having strong potential to become clinician scientists. The institution must commit to offering a full-time faculty position or equivalent to the applicant upon satisfactory completion of research training. The first phase of the award offers \$48 000 annually plus an annual research allowance of \$3500 for a maximum of 6 years. The second phase of this program offers a salary contribution of \$50 000 per year for a maximum of 6 years plus \$40 000 per year research allowance for the first 3 years. The second phase of this award requires that a minimum of 30 hours per week be committed to research, but applicants can do clinical



work to complement the salary support within the guidelines of the home institution.

**Salary support**

Three awards are available to researchers with faculty appointments, and all require a guarantee of 75% time protected for research: New Investigator's Award, Investigator Award, and Senior Investigator Award. The New Investigator's Award is given to people in the first 5 years of their faculty appointment doing independent research. They must not be in training for a higher degree while holding the award. The award offers \$50 000 annually for 5 years. If applicants are not already holding a peer-reviewed operating grant, they must apply to the CIHR competition concurrently. If unsuccessful, they might receive "top-up" funding (see details on website<sup>3</sup>), but must apply for an operating grant again within 12 months.

Faculty members who have been appointed for at least 5 but fewer than 10 years doing independent research may apply for an Investigator Award. These researchers will normally have already made an outstanding contribution and have a reputation for excellence in research. The award is \$70 000 annually for 5 years.

Investigators with 10 or more years of experience as independent investigators who have demonstrated "exceptional merit" and are internationally renowned may apply for a Senior Investigator Award. It offers \$70 000 annually for 5 years.

**Preparing to apply**

Applicants for training support should make every effort to choose a supervisor with a good track record as a scientist (papers and grants) and as a supervisor (past trainees have published). Prior publication (or acceptance for publication) of a paper or even an abstract is very helpful for fellowship applicants; Clinician Scientists usually have had several papers published.

Applicants for salary support should remember that they must convince the awards committee that they are worthy of a substantial investment: \$250 000

to \$350 000 over 5 years. It is essential to present a coherent plan of research with a clear focus, even though it might have several different components or steps throughout the time of the award. That plan should be underpinned by a strong conceptual framework. Given the mandate of the CIHR, it is very helpful to have demonstrable interdisciplinary collaboration, including, where appropriate, co-investigators for specific projects.

Prior success completing projects and publishing results demonstrates an essential skill set for a productive research career. Although it is not a requirement, having operating grant support for the first year or two of the award period helps a great deal in the current, very competitive environment. Even applicants for New Investigator's Awards should direct all their attention to being successful in a national peer-review grant competition. Few get funded without an operating grant.

And finally, the one-page summary of research (a part of every application package) should be crystal clear to someone who is not involved in the same field of research. Remember that CIHR awards committees are made up of people from many diverse backgrounds, and the summary page should be easily understood by any researcher. Test this by vetting the summary page with someone in a completely different area of endeavour.

The CIHR has put programs in place that are suitable to family physicians, so the onus is on us to take advantage of these opportunities. Achieving success in these training and salary award competitions will not be easy, but we owe it to our colleagues in practice and in academia to do our best. ❖

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**References**

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