

## How free are Canada's unmuzzled scientists?

The muzzles were coming off, or at least that's how it seemed four months ago when Canada's new Liberal government sanctioned federal scientists to "speak freely" after a decade of increasing restriction and secrecy under the Conservatives. A flurry of hopeful reports followed: top ministers granted interviews, scientists at Environment Canada and Fisheries and Oceans Canada celebrated new freedoms, and journalists got answers without a runaround. But it appears the Liberals' sunny ways haven't reached Health Canada, which still keeps scientists on a short leash.

Communications policies adopted under the former Conservative government "have not changed," according to Health Canada's chief of media relations, Eric Morrissette. Virtually all communications are vetted by media relations staff, and in most cases, they provide written statements instead of direct access to experts. Morrissette claims that's all most journalists request. "We have always made our scientists and researchers available to the media and the public to discuss the science behind their work."

Those researchers told a different story, however, in a 2013 survey conducted by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC), the union representing over 15 000 federal scientists. Ninety-four percent of Health Canada scientists said they were not allowed to speak freely to the media about their work. They also reported the highest rates of interference by management with manuscripts and conference presentations, as well as requests to exclude or alter information in government documents for non-scientific reasons.

According to PIPSC, no scientific reasons have been provided to justify restricting scientists' access to media, and the "big chill" described by the union in 2013 has yet to thaw under a new government.

CMAJ emailed 25 Health Canada researchers — many senior scientists



REUTERS/Chris Wattie

Despite protests, such as this one in 2013, and a new federal government, many scientists still suffer under "draconian" communications policies, say watchdog groups.

— across nine directorates asking if they were able to discuss their work without the involvement of communications staff. Two declined to comment and the rest did not respond, although seven of those did send receipts indicating that they had read the message.

### Unmuzzling not enough

"I think a lot of scientists are still confused as to what they can and can't do, especially following 10 years of having these very restrictive policies," says Katie Gibbs, executive director of the science-advocacy group Evidence for Democracy.

Her 2014 study of media policies at 16 federal departments gave Health Canada a failing grade for safeguards against political interference, and concluded that Canadian scientists face far more restrictions on sharing research than their American counterparts.

"I'm not convinced that an announcement saying, 'You're free to talk,' is going to be enough to change the culture," Gibbs says.

Concerns about muzzling at Health Canada are longstanding, dating back

to the Liberals under Paul Martin, she adds. "A lot of the government scientists that I've talked to say the muzzling started [first] in Health Canada."

In a Mar. 9 open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, PIPSC and Evidence for Democracy warned that "the scale of communication restriction under the previous government has left a legacy of draconian communication policies in many departments."

According to the groups, new policies are needed to "clarify the rules for government scientists, protect the integrity of their research and make it harder for future governments to muzzle scientists."

They're calling for an overarching policy on science integrity that would ensure timely release of scientific information; affirm scientists' rights to speak publicly and have last eyes on communications documents about their research; and safeguard against scientific misconduct and undue commercial influence.

PIPSC wants these protections enshrined in federal scientists' collective agreements, and will begin new contract negotiations with the govern-

ment this week. “Then if the rules are broken, there would be a grievance and actions that could be taken,” explains Emily Watkins, special advisor to the president of the union.

According to Duff Conacher, cofounder of Democracy Watch, a nonpartisan citizen advocacy group, new top-down policies must be paired with training and clear agreements on interpretation for researchers and man-

agers. Otherwise, “policies are just vague words on paper that can be interpreted in different ways,” he says.

Conacher notes that many preexisting communications policies “are not clear,” so senior officials can change interpretations to suit their needs.

It’s not surprising scientists are unwilling to speak out in such an environment, he adds. “People with mortgages and kids and financial demands

are not going to stick their necks out without clear lines and knowing for sure they’re protected.”

In the meantime, “there are not a lot of incentives for the Liberals to actually change the policy until the media starts covering the fact that the announcement was not actually a policy change.” — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

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