

MRC changes its name, doubles its budget

Medical Research Council of Canada President Henry Friesen is ready to call it quits, having accomplished his goal of disbanding the 40-year-old institution over which he presides. If all goes according to plan, the MRC will cease to exist sometime around the beginning of April, to be replaced by the brand-new Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

"We should see bill C-13, the legislation establishing the CIHR and repealing the MRC act, become law by Apr. 1," Friesen said in an interview. A call for nominations for CIHR president and positions on the new governing council closed in mid-January, with more than 400 applications received. But Friesen's name was not among them.

"I have served notice that the stage is set and it would be right for a new council and president to take on the exciting challenges ahead," Friesen said. "I'm looking forward to a little less hectic pace. I really felt somebody younger and full of energy could be more effective in the next stage."

Friesen said he will be happy to stay on until a new person is chosen "and then watch with great interest to see how things unfold."

The federal government announced its intention to create the CIHR in the February 1999 budget. An interim governing council was established shortly after, with Friesen as chair, and it has been working tirelessly since then to make the new institutes a reality, the MRC president said.

The CIHR will have a much broader mandate than the MRC. Through a network of research institutions, it will support a wide spectrum of health research, from basic science to clinical research to health services and population health. It will also have a much larger budget — by its second year of operation, the annual budget of the CIHR will be close to \$500 million, nearly double that of the MRC, Friesen said.

The idea for the CIHR first surfaced at an MRC council meeting in March 1998. The council recognized

that it was "substantially at a disadvantage at an international level in terms of support for health and medical research," said Friesen, "and unless the MRC developed a strategy that was more inclusive, it would be left further behind." This led to the idea of replacing the council with a series of a "thematically focused institutes" linked through technology.

The new initiative did create "a certain ambivalence," Friesen admitted, "because there is a deeply felt loyalty to the MRC by its constituency — but I think you have to recognize the world is changing, and institutions are not immune."

The MRC governing council voted "virtually unanimously" in support of the idea, but acceptance within the medical community was a bit more guarded. "There were a lot of voices of caution, concern and scepticism," said Friesen, "but now I perceive a sense of exhilaration and excitement. Of course, it's helped by the increased funding."
— *Léo Charbonneau, Ottawa*

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