Affirmative action needed to give women fair shot at research chairs?

With polite pleas for gender equity apparently falling on deaf ears, the nation's universities will soon be asked to justify why they aren't nominating more women for lucrative Canada Research Chairs (CRC, **www.chairs.gc.ca/**).

The CRC steering committee was scheduled to meet Sept. 25 to put its imprimatur on a plan that will obligate universities to provide a written rationale for the gender distribution of nominees in future competitions for chairs. The committee is headed by the presidents of the nation's 3 granting councils: the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

It is hoped the move will embarrass university administrators into nominating more women while at the same time staving off demands for affirmative-action quotas or other measures to promote stronger gender equity under the ambitious $900-million program, which is to create 2000 new university research chairs by 2005. (The appointments are supposed to be made by 2005, with funding spread over 10 years.)

Demands for reform have escalated since last spring's release of a study commissioned by the CRC program, which indicated that women have received only 15% of chairs to date, even though they comprise 25% of the academic pool.

The discrepancy is even more pronounced in health care. In disciplines falling under CIHR, women have received only 11.5% (14/122) of the "Tier I" chairs that free "star" researchers from teaching duties with financial support of $1.4 million over 7 years. They've fared slightly better in competitions for 5-year-long "Tier 2" chairs that are worth $500 000 and are intended to help universities replace aging faculty with "rising stars." Women have garnered 20.7% (17/82) of these appointments.

It's been posited that the causes of the discrepancy range from lack of ambition on the distaff side of academe to favouritism within old-boys' networks.

However, lack of ambition doesn't appear to be a factor in other CIHR career awards. The percentage of women receiving New Investigator, Investigator or Senior/Distinguished career awards is double that of the CRC program, says CIHR vice-president (research portfolio) Dr. Mark Bisby.

"The big difference is the way they are allocated. Unlike the CRCs, in which the university puts forward a name, the individuals apply [for career awards]. The second related and important difference is that ours is a national competition, where Dr. 'X' from Dalhousie is compared to Dr. 'Y' from UBC, so that the determining factor is solely the excellence of the candidate.

"To me, it strongly suggests that universities are not doing as good a job as they might at nominating excellent women. When they're competing on a level playing field that's purely [based on] scientific excellence, you get twice as many of them with awards."

Requiring universities to provide a written rationale for the gender distribution of nominations will likely be an effective form of moral suasion, says CRC director of operations Denis Croux. "Certainly the pressure is on, and I think the universities are very, very sensitive to the issue."

Although more drastic measures such as quotas would be difficult to implement because universities are autonomous institutions falling under provincial jurisdiction, he said "all options remain open."

Others believe the time is already ripe for drastic reform of the CRC program, which has been besieged by criticism almost since its inception. Interdisciplinary resentment was created when the natural and biomedical sciences were allocated 45% and 35% of available chairs, respectively, while the social sciences and humanities got only 20%, even though they represent 54% of academic positions at Canadian universities. The chairs were divvied among universities according to their success in obtaining funds from granting councils, which engendered bitterness among small universities. It has also been argued that the program promotes interuniversity poaching and is the source of invidious distinctions within faculty ranks.

The latest brouhaha "is but another sign of systemic problems with the program, which was hastily cobbled together in 1999 without careful thought being paid to its impact on universities," says Jim Turk, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers. "We need an external study of the whole thing to find out what solutions would be appropriate." — *Wayne Kondro*, Ottawa

Remains of a day: half of New York 9/11 victims identified by ME

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says New York City's chief medical examiner had to issue 2734 death certificates for people killed in last year's attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC). The attacks also forced the CDC to alter its mortality-classification system.

A special Sept. 11 issue of the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (*MMWR*) stated that death certificates had been issued for 1373 people whose remains have been found and for 1361 whose remains were not found. Methods used to identify the dead included DNA screening (645), dental radiographs (188), fingerprints (71), personal effects (19) and photographs (16). Multiple methods were used to identify 407 people, while 966 were identified using a single method.

The WTC attacks created an unprecedented need to issue death certificates in the absence of human remains. The *MMWR* says certificates for those whose remains were found listed specific causes of death. Certificates for those whose remains were not found listed the cause of death as "physical injuries (body not found)."

The WTC attacks also forced the CDC to include deaths due to terrorist attack in its classification system. Terrorism is defined as "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." — *CMAJ*