

To sustain and strengthen the journal we also work toward the following strategic goals:

8. To improve the quality of scientific content by competing with other top general medical journals for high-quality research and other contributions.
9. To maintain the journal in a sound fiscal state.

We value the support of the oversight committee and the CMA in the pursuit of these objectives and strategic goals, as well as the continuing advice and input from the 20 members of our Editorial Board, who fill an invaluable role in helping to reflect the interests and needs of our readers and contributors.

Dr. Hoey is Editor and Ms. Todkill is Senior Deputy Editor of *CMAJ*.

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# Toward effective Canadian public-private partnerships in health research

Alan Bernstein

In a recent editorial on researcher-university-industry research contracts, *CMAJ* calls for further study and guidance on issues affecting clinical research in this country.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it recognizes the need for leadership in promoting and monitoring "ethical behaviour in research."

As Canada's lead federal health research agency, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) has a responsibility to promote and ensure ethical conduct in research, a responsibility that it has vigorously embraced since its establishment. The significant growth in industry support for research over the past 10-20 years has greatly strengthened health research efforts in this country, as well as our potential to translate research findings into improved health for Canadians. At the same time, all partnerships bring with them their own challenges of establishing shared vision, goals and standards of research.

In early 2001, CIHR's Governing Council established a national Working Group on Partnerships co-chaired by Dr. Matthew Spence, President and CEO of the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, and Dr. Michel Bureau, Président and CEO, Fonds de recherches en santé du Québec, and including representatives of other agencies and, importantly, of industry.<sup>2</sup> That working group's report emphasized core values of freedom of in-

quiry, dissemination of research results, integrity of research, sensitivity to conflict-of-interest issues, accountability and transparency, and the paramount importance of the public interest as an essential element of publicly supported research. CIHR and *CMAJ* also co-sponsored a meeting of editors of Canadian peer-reviewed health sciences journals in November 2001 to promote and enhance discourse regarding the ethical issues involved in research, dissemination of results, editing and publication.<sup>3</sup>

These activities complement the ongoing consideration of ethical issues within each of CIHR's 13 institutes, its entire research portfolio and its Governing Council, and reflect the foundational values and framework driving our approach to partnerships within the larger health research community. CIHR is committed to building on these initiatives in order to develop a robust program of research on ethics, the objectives of which are to achieve greater clarity and consistency in the ethical principles governing health research practices.

Looking forward, and as advocated by *CMAJ*, CIHR is planning to support an analysis of Canadian practices following a recent US study that surveyed investigator independence and subject protection in contracts between health research institutions and industrial sponsors.<sup>4</sup> This

study was carried out in response to updated guidelines issued by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE),<sup>5</sup> a distinguished group of editors of leading medical journals. Instituting a similar study for our own health research centres and health sciences faculties will provide important insights into the Canadian context in which our health research occurs.

CIHR continues to work through the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics and the Secretariat on Research Ethics to ensure that the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*<sup>6</sup> reflects the core values described here. We will join with the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to ensure that the *Memorandum of Understanding on Roles and Responsibilities in the Management of Federal Grants and Awards*,<sup>7</sup> which describes the roles of these federal agencies and the institutions that receive such federal funds, adequately deals with issues such as conflict of interest, communication of research results and patient informed consent. CIHR will also consult with key stakeholders involved in research partnerships and will revise its own guidelines and policies to deal with issues such as clinical trial design and access to and interpretation of data, so that publications from the full range of trials and other types of study funded by CIHR meet the ICMJE criteria.

We recognize that these are complex issues involving many players, and during this process we welcome suggestions as to how CIHR, in concert with others, can work to address these challenges. CIHR is committed to a clear, constructive and transparent process that is designed to protect human subjects and the public interest, while fulfilling our mandate to support public-private research partnerships that advance the health of Canadians.

Dr. Bernstein is President, Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Ottawa, Ont.

Competing interests: None declared.

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