Health research gets middling grades

What are the consequences of having your discipline deemed a mediocre research performer? Will it be used by the Conservative government to justify funnelling money into "areas of strength," while lopping off resources to those pegged as weak sisters?

Those are among concerns being raised off-the-record by the academic community in the wake of *The State of Science & Technology in Canada*, a report from the recently-minted Council of Canadian Academies, whose president, Dr. Peter Nicholson, calls the across-the-waterfront assessment "reasonable, rational and antecedent to any serious policy decisions."

Commissioned by the Conservative government as part of its forthcoming overhaul of the federal S&T strategy, the report featured 4 different analyses: an opinion survey of 1529 scientific experts; bibliometric and technometric (patent) studies; a review of Canada's international S&T agreements; and a literature review.

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The results varied by type of analyses. The bibliometric analysis, for example, yielded higher ratings than the survey of experts, which caused the biggest stir, if only because just 46% of respondents pegged Canada's S&T effort as "strong" compared to other advanced nations, and 39% said the situation is worsening.

Nicholson says those varying dynamics aren't surprising.

"The survey was really attempting to gauge how sophisticated... [any] particular segment of the Canadian economy is equipped technologically. It's not necessarily how much are we inventing... but what's the quality of the S&T in our forest sector, our mining sector, our medical devices sector, etc."

Only 8 health and related life sciences and technologies sub-areas were ranked among the survey's top 50: medical genetics (11th); genetics, genomics & proteomics (18th); cancer research (23rd); neurobiology/neurosciences (30th); genomic and proteomic technologies (36th); circulatory & respiratory (37th); infection & immunity (38th); and neuroscience, mental health, addiction (43rd).

Several other health-related disciplines were among the lowest rated: medical nanotech (176th); dental science (174th); and pharmaceutical development (165th).

Research in natural resources sub-areas nabbed 17 of the top 50 spots, including the entire top 10, while information and communication technologies nabbed 13.

Clinical research received a surprisingly low (109th) rating. But the report cites an unnamed expert explaining that's a consequence of the struggle to attract bright young minds because of "difficulties securing salary dollars, uneven institutional support (often in conflict with patient care mandates), perceptions of systematic barriers (e.g., underdeveloped infrastructure to support clinical trials, multicentre ethics review). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

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US pharma company fined $435 million

Schering-Plough Corp., the US pharmaceutical manufacturer perhaps best known for its anti-allergy medication Claritin, has agreed to pay US$435 million in fines to settle criminal and civil charges that it illegally promoted several drugs. The agreement was reached in late summer with the US Justice Department, which also alleged the New Jersey–based company had defrauded Medicaid, the government health care program.

The case marks the third time in the last 5 years that the company, which has annual sales of approximately US$10 billion, has reached a multimillion settlement with the government. One of the largest health care fines ever meted out by the Justice Department, it brings to US$1.3 billion the total paid by Schering-Plough as a result of the settlements.

According to the government, Schering-Plough engaged in illegal sales and marketing practices involving several cancer drugs by promoting their use for treatments not government-approved at the time. The allegations involved temozolomide (Temodar), which the company promoted for use in treating brain tumours and metastatic cancer, and Interferon alfa-2a (Intron A), for use in superficial bladder cancer and hepatitis C.

Although it's illegal for pharmaceuticals to promote drugs for non FDA-approved treatments, doctors have no such restrictions. According to the Justice Department, Schering-Plough paid doctors honoraria, directed prestigious and lucrative research grants their way, placed them on well-paying medical advisory boards and treated them to lavish dinners and other forms of entertainment in return for prescribing the drugs for the non-approved (off-label) usages.

The Justice Department also alleged that Schering-Plough defrauded Medicaid of US$4.3 million in the late 1990s by overcharging the agency, which provides health insurance to the poor and disabled, for the systemic antihistamine, Claritin RediTabs. Justice also said Schering-Plough underpaid rebates for the stomach ailment drug K-Dur (a potassium supplement).

While Schering-Plough said the off-label promotions were isolated incidents, the government said they were part of a national plan that the pharmaceutical company's staff were trained to enact.

"This settlement sends a clear message to the pharmaceutical industry," said Paul McNulty, the US deputy attorney general, "that the Justice Department will not tolerate these deceptive and illegal marketing practices." — Paul McLaughlin, Toronto

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