

Science minister addresses criticisms, promotes robust science

“What I asked — all I ever asked — was: could you do the science?” said Kirsty Duncan, Canada’s new science minister, responding to criticism of her past support for chronic cerebrospinal venous insufficiency (CCSVI) therapy for multiple sclerosis (MS). “Let’s see what the evidence shows. I’ve been a strong advocate throughout my life for evidence-based decision-making. We need debate in science, and it needs to be free and open debate.”

Speaking to *CMAJ* following a brief address to the Canadian Science Policy Conference in Ottawa Nov. 26, Duncan sighed and furrowed her brow, appearing frustrated with [recent media reports](#) featuring prominent MS researchers criticizing her stand on the controversial treatment. In 2011, Duncan introduced a private member’s bill that called for Canadian clinical trials and follow-up of CCSVI treatment cases. Even after the bill’s defeat, she [continued to blog](#) about poor or absent follow-up treatment for those who had gone abroad, at one point [criticizing the Canadian Medical Association \(CMA\)](#) for opposing her bill.

When asked whether she continues to be concerned about the role in CCSVI research of the CMA and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) — also mentioned in her blog — Duncan said, “I so appreciate CMA, and I’ve worked with CMA and I’ve worked with CIHR.” Duncan’s blog states that she met with CMA President John Haggie in 2012 to discuss follow-up of CCSVI patients.

In her new role as science minister, Duncan does not have direct responsi-

bility for medical research or CIHR, as these continue to fall under the health minister, Dr. Jane Philpott. And, in fact, no government agencies or departments report to Duncan. The Natural



Kirsty Duncan, Canada’s new science minister, says science matters more now than ever before to address problems such as climate change.

Sciences and Engineering Research Council and the National Research Council Canada are under the minister of innovation, science and economic development, Navdeep Bains. Duncan said she and Bains are expected to “work as a team.”

Duncan explained that her role “will be to support scientific research and the integration of scientific considerations in our investment and policy choices” during her speech before an appreciative audience of science-policy experts and scientists.

Duncan’s speech “was a breath of fresh air for the science community. I felt positive about the talk,” commented Janet Halliwell, chair of the board of the Canadian Science Policy Centre and an independent consultant in research and development issues. She said Duncan was “warm and passionate. She was eloquent in her statement of commitment to science and excellence in science.”

Duncan’s broad statements of support met with spontaneous applause. “Science matters more than ever before,” Duncan said, “because the challenges we face, like climate change and shrinking biodiversity, are ever greater. So it follows we need robust science in Canada for the public good.”

However, there were no specifics on how this will translate into research funding. “She said ‘research climate,’ she did not say ‘research funding,’” noted Halliwell, “but she wanted to reinforce and reassure the research community that, moving forward, it was going to be part of the government platform.”

Duncan emphasized the government’s swift action to restore the long-form census and to allow government scientists to “speak freely about their work.” Another election pledge, to appoint a chief science officer “to ensure that scientific analyses are considered when government makes decisions,” will take more time, Duncan said. The mandate for the position is not yet established, and Duncan would not state a timetable for the appointment, saying the government needs to study what has been done in other countries. — Carolyn Brown, Ottawa, Ont.

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