

The Birth of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences

Canada does not possess a single organisation representing the broad and rich diversity exemplified by the health sciences. This single observation is a remarkable oxymoron at a time when interdisciplinary and translational research has become the currency of scientific advancement. The exponential growth in knowledge and the explosion of novel technologies place a high priority on broadening our understanding of the impact of advances in science and technology and how they impact both directly and indirectly on the lives of Canadians. Moreover, the globalization of science presents a compelling need to collaborate and compete on an international level in order for Canada to play its appropriate role on the world stage.

Five years ago, the then Secretary of State for Science, Research and Development, Gilbert Normand, hosted a national round table to consider the creation of an independent national science organization. This round table recognized the need for government and all Canadians to develop a knowledge-based economy founded on informed decisions that would keep Canada at the cutting edge of science and technology. To achieve this, it was recognized that informed decisions rely on a foundation of independent multidisciplinary assessments on key scientific matters that affect the public interest. It was also appreciated that a single authoritative voice, speaking on behalf of Canadian science through a scientific organization would provide enhanced communication and credibility fundamental to high quality international dialogue and collaboration. Moreover, the globalization of science creates both the need and an opportunity for Canada to collaborate and compete on an international level and ensure its appropriate position on the world stage. Three founding organizations including the Canadian Academy of Engineering, the Canadian Institute of Academic Medicine and the Royal Society of Canada worked together to develop the concept of the Canadian Academies of Science (CAS). It was then understood that the Canadian Institute of Academic Medicine would play a leadership role in developing a Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (CAHS) that would include the broad range of other health science disci-

plines, and that this new Academy would be one of the three founding academies.

The proposed mission of the Canadian Academies of Science is two-fold; 1) to provide a source of credible independent expert assessments on the sciences underlying pressing issues and matters of public interest and 2) to provide a voice for Canada on behalf of the sciences both nationally and internationally. Following this articulation of strategic direction, a structure was conceived based on an extensive evaluation of other countries' national academies including the United States' National Academies and the Royal Society in Britain. At its outset, the governing structure of the Canadian Academies of Science would involve professional and public representation, including two members appointed by each of the three member organizations and six appointed for the general public. A base level of firm funding from federal sources was anticipated with the specific expectation that stable and continuous funding for a period of 10 years would ensure an arm's length relationship with the Government of Canada and full independence for the academies as it related to the performance of scientific assessments. This has now been assured based on the February 23, 2005 budget. (1)

In July 2001, the then President of the Canadian Institute of Academic Medicine (CIAM), Eliot Phillipson convened a small working group to begin a consultative process necessary to establish a new health sciences academy. World events, including the tragedy of September 11, 2001, coupled with changes in governmental priorities, structure and personnel curtailed progress on this important initiative.

The transition in federal leadership and emergence of the Honourable Paul Martin as Prime Minister of Canada has had a transforming and catalytic effect on the concept of the Canadian Academies of Science. His emphasis on a knowledge-based economy and his strong support for investment in science and technology was also signaled in April 2004 by the appointment of Dr. Arthur Carty, National Science Advisor, reporting directly to the Prime Minister. Dr. Carty has been instrumental in working with the three member organizations of the Canadian Academies of Science in

TABLE 1: Description of Assessment(s)

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- Involve a diversity of stakeholders (scientists and non-scientists) to independently identify and formulate the questions requiring expert assessment.
 - Ensure credible, independent expert assessments of important issues to support informed decision-making by the public, government and other stakeholders; assessments will consider the impact of expanding knowledge on society.
 - Widely disseminate the results of assessments, as well as the scientific base for the assessments, in a form that can be understood by the public.
 - Enhance government, industry and the public's ability to access the best available science on pressing issues with the objective of informing debate and decision-making.
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promoting the Canadian academies concept and ensuring it was a priority for the current government. Accordingly, in his response to the Throne on October 6, 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin assured the future of the Canadian Academies of Science by announcing "that the government of Canada will mandate the Canadian Academies of Science. We seek to create a national alliance of leading scientific and engineering societies, one that will operate at arm's length from government and receive operational funding...over the next 10 years. The new Academies of Science will be a source of expert advice on scientific aspects of important domestic and international issues, and will give our country a prestigious voice among the choir of international science groups."(2) A description of the assessment process is provided in Table 1. The provisional board of six individuals, drawn from the three member organizations, met with officials from the Ministry of Industry in early February and the creation of the Academies of Science and appointment of the six public governors is expected in the coming months.

With the strong support of the Canadian Institute of Academic Medicine members and its governing body, leaders from each of the health science disciplines including medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, rehabilitation science and veterinary medicine met in September 2004 as an initial working group (and are the authors of this publication). An agreement was reached on the model for and functions of the new Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (CAHS) and criteria for membership were established. Broad consultation and support from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Alan Bernstein) and the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (Eliot Phillipson) were exceedingly helpful in advancing this

initiative. Whereas it was agreed that the overriding mission of CAHS, as aligned with the CAS, was to provide expert scientific assessments on key issues relevant to the health of Canadians, it was felt that some additional roles not previously fulfilled would be of value to Canadians. These include:

- 1) development of timely, informed, strategic assessments on urgent health issues
- 2) development of sound and informed public policy related to these issues
- 3) surveillance of global health related events to enhance Canada's state of readiness for the future.

The CAHS working group, in collaboration and with the support of CIAM, decided to spearhead an initial assessment aimed at addressing the question: what are the barriers and benefits to interdisciplinary health sciences research in Canada? A panel of interdisciplinary experts, lead by Dr. Judith Hall from the University of British Columbia will address this issue over the coming months. An inaugural meeting of CAHS is planned for September 21-22, 2005 in Vancouver at the time of the Canadian Society of Clinical Investigation and Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons meeting in that city.

A membership committee representing the six health sciences disciplines and chaired by Martin Schechter, Vice President of CAHS, has been struck and will vet nominations broadly solicited across Canada with the objective of establishing the initial CAHS membership in April 2005. Members elected to CAHS will be well recognized by their peers nationally and internationally for their contributions to the promotion of health science. They will have demonstrated leadership, creativity, and distinctive competencies and commitment to advance academic health sciences. Whereas CAHS membership will arise from medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, rehabilitation science and veterinary medicine, all individuals with expertise in health sciences, irrespective of their primary discipline, will be considered.

The birth of the Canadian Academy of Health Science is a welcome development for all health scientists and Canadians and long overdue. There is much work ahead, but the collaboration, energy and goodwill that have emerged thus far are an encouraging foundation upon which to face the enormous future challenges and realize the commensurate opportunities.

Acknowledgement

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the contributions of Heather Good to this initiative.

References

For additional information about CAHS and future notices will soon be available on <http://www.cahs-acss.ca>.

- 1 Government of Canada Budget Plan 2005, February 23, 2005
<http://www.fin.gc.ca/budget05/pdf/bp2005e.pdf>
Accessed February 2005.
- 2 Prime Minister's Reply to the Speech from the Throne (SFT), October 6, 2005
<http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/sft-ddt.asp?id=2> Accessed December 2004.

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