



ALBERTA GRADUATE
COUNCIL

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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Laboratories on Life-Support

AGC meets with the Minister of Health and Wellness, Ron Liepert

Christopher Skappak, Chair of the Alberta Graduate Council (AGC), has undertaken a new initiative on behalf of over 12, 000 graduate students in the province of Alberta.

On Wednesday, July 29th 2009, Skappak secured a meeting with the Minister of Health and Wellness, Ron Liepert, to discuss shortages in funding for laboratory operating costs, a problem Skappak sees as both profound and widespread, affecting research labs at the University of Alberta, and across the province.

On May 15th, 2008, Minister Liepert announced the government's plans to conglomerate regionalized health authorities, and three provincial entities managing mental health, addictions and cancer, in an effort to improve the efficiency of health care services in the province. The broadened scope of this newly established Alberta Health Services (AHS) has some, Skappak among them, fearing that previously available research funds will be dissolved and any plans to initiate new funds will be stymied. The former Capital Health Region previously funded research chairs that covered the cost of clinician-scientists' salaries. Moreover, Capital Health made available a team grant, whereby several professors could receive operating funding for a research project. Given cuts inherent in systematic restructuring, the fate of these programs and any hope for creation of similar programs hangs in the balance with the restructuring of AHS.

While AHS continues to prioritize research in general, its focus narrows primarily on the third and fourth pillars of health research as established by the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR): Health systems and population research. While research in these areas is both merited and overdue, this limited focus further concerns Skappak and his colleagues, as it shifts both attention and funds from the first two pillars of health research, which remain of equal import: Biomedical and translational clinical research.

Alberta is not without funding entities committed to the advancement of medical research, such as the Alberta Heritage Fund for Medical Research (AHFMR), established in 1980. However, as announced by the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology, Doug Horner, in March of this year, the Government of Alberta aims to realign its research and innovation system. Horner's proposed Alberta Research and Innovation Act, Bill 27, entails the merging of funding agencies into four primary bodies overseen by an advisory board. Although it has been assured that amidst this restructuring AHFMR will stay intact and meet current commitments, the ripple of these organizational adjustments will likely be felt in all funding branches in the province.

Furthermore, AHFMR's directive is of an international scope. Its primary objective is to recruit the best and the brightest from around the globe. The attainment of this objective is evidenced by the high percentage of successful grant applicants this initiative yields. Three percent of the University of Alberta's academic appointments are positions initially secured by AHFMR funding. This fraction of appointments acquires an impressive 20 – 25% of all funding received at the U of A, indicative of their scholarly credibility. However, AHFMR lacks the capacity to carry the cost of these recruits' salaries as they ascend the institutional ranks. These considerations and budget constraints leave little at AHFMR for the crucial but quotidian needs of the research labs themselves.

For this reason, Skappak took his appeal to the Ministry of Health and Wellness. While the recruitment successes of AHFMR and the Government of Alberta should be applauded, esteemed scholars and scientists must be incentivized to base their lives and research in our province, a formidable deterrent of which is the inability to access necessary funding for lab operating costs. Christopher Skappak argues that responsibility for relieving these financial pressures should be shared by both the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology and the Ministry of Health and Wellness.

Currently, nearly all funding for laboratory operation costs in Alberta comes from the CIHR. Unfortunately, only 22% of applicants are successful in securing CIHR funding, which leaves research supervisors scrambling to keep their research initiatives afloat. The provincial governments of Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec have supplemented CIHR funding with their own funding initiatives, through agencies such as Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, the Michael Smith Foundation, and Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec, respectively. Alberta has of yet to provide a comparable supplemental body, which intensifies the shortages felt on the ground level. This is a reality perhaps understood best by research lab employees, often meagerly compensated Masters students disheartened by the funding obstacles faced by their lab supervisors.

An intimate awareness of funding shortages made two such students, Emily Maclean and Emma Newman, well-suited spokespersons. Both were in attendance at the meeting with Minister Liepert and the AGC chair as representatives for a concerned group of future academic and research professionals. Their concern is both a reasonable and simple one: What incentives are provided now, and might be maintained or enhanced in the future, by the Government of Alberta, to attract academics and scientists to careers in scientific research? Moreover, what reasons are there to do so in the province of Alberta, versus other regions, both within and without Canada, where funding opportunities are more abundant? The Government of



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Alberta has expressed repeated desire to become and remain a centre for academic excellence on an international stage. This endeavour might be realized only through a commitment to supporting research on all levels of operation.

To give credit where credit is due, the Government of Alberta has erected the necessary and remarkable physical infrastructure required for such advanced scientific laboratories. However, as Minister Liepert himself acknowledged, it appears that this was achieved to the detriment of wise spending management. Liepert's response to Skappak's appeal was both expected and understandable. In a time of economic recession, available funding wells have all but dried. However, it should be recognized that high-achieving students make a long-term academic commitment to science, to the benefit of these institutions and our scientific community overall. The position of Skappak and the AGC is that they do so with an insecure future. It has been estimated that over the past thirty years, thirty new diseases have emerged. As a result, there is a need for the constant training of the next generation of researchers. Given this rapidly advancing and changing scientific climate, it is of paramount importance that our educational and academic systems remain current and relevant, and that our institutional and operational infrastructures keep pace with our impressive structural capital.

By Jessica Jacobs-Mino

Jessica Jacobs-Mino is currently an undergrad student at the University of Alberta in Psychology and Creative Writing. She has been contracted by the AGC to report on events in the province.

Emily Maclean is a CIHR funded Masters student working on genetic regulation and control of allergies and asthma at the University of Alberta.

Emma Newman is currently researching a novel antiviral medication and its effects on normal human cell regulation.