Budget 2012: Health Research Escapes Finance Minister’s Axe But Not Scalpel

The 10% cut in the CIHR budget anticipated by some did not materialize but surgical changes continue to redefine the face of research in Canada. Budget 2012 continues the Harper Government’s strategic funding approach to support and develop priority areas, increasingly to enhance industry-academic relationships.

The Harper Government’s priorities in funding research and development are clear: “This support has contributed to a strong foundation for Canada’s innovation system, ensuring that Canadian researchers can continue to generate groundbreaking ideas and businesses have access to the knowledge, ideas, people and resources needed to bring this knowledge to market and create high-quality jobs.”

The CIHR budget for 2012-13 was cut by $15M but, $15M of “new funding” was provided to support its Strategy for Patient Oriented Research (SPOR). Thus, there is no net change in CIHR’s annual budget this year, a remarkable achievement in the current fiscal climate. An additional $15M cut will apply in 2013-14 reducing the on-going annual budget by $30M. Efforts will no doubt be made by CIHR to once again recapture this funding through initiatives like SPOR that resonate with this government. It is anticipated that CIHR will find some of these savings with internal efficiencies and by eliminating some lower priority programs. Importantly, there is no anticipated reduction to the operating grants program, which is already under incredible strain. The reforms to the open operating grants program and peer review may provide some efficiencies in the long term, but will not be a major factor as CIHR needs to find its $15M “savings” this fiscal year.

CIHR was spared the cuts applied to other agencies like the CBC, but as scientists need to continue to promote the value of the research we do, especially to the public. We need to work together with our leaders and decision makers to ensure that discovery research across the full spectrum of health research is recognized as the foundation to innovation and is strongly supported and continually strengthened. We also need to ensure that the funding the government provides is used to support excellence through a rigorous, open and transparent competitive process.

Some Highlights of the Economic Action Plan 2012:

• $37 million annually starting in 2012–13 to the granting councils to enhance their support for industry-academic research partnerships.
• $60 million for Genome Canada to launch a new applied research competition in the area of human health, and to sustain the Science and Technology Centres until 2014–15.
• $6.5 million over three years for a research project at McMaster University to evaluate team-based approaches to health care delivery.
• $17 million over two years to further advance the development of alternatives to existing isotope production technologies.
• $10 million over two years to the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) to link Canadians to global research networks.
- $500 million over five years, starting in 2014–15, to the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) to support advanced research infrastructure.
- $40 million over two years to support CANARIE’s operation of Canada’s ultra-high speed research network.
- $23 million over two years to Natural Resources Canada to enhance satellite data reception capacity.”

“The granting councils will be pursuing operational efficiencies and reallocation of funding from lower-priority programs to generate savings. The Government will fully reinvest 2012–13 savings in priority areas of the granting councils, particularly in industry-academic partnerships.”

The “savings” is the $15M budget cut to CIHR, which was “re-invested” in SPOR, a CIHR priority.

“Economic Action Plan 2012 proposes $37 million annually starting in 2012–13 to the granting councils to enhance their support for industry-academic research partnership initiatives. The new resources for the councils will be allocated as follows:

- $15 million per year to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research for its Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research (SPOR).
- $15 million per year to the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council for its Strategy for Partnerships and Innovation.
- $7 million per year to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for its industry-academic partnership initiatives.”

CFI and Genome Canada funding continues over the short term:

- “$500 million over five years, starting in 2014–15, to the Canada Foundation for Innovation. The funding will support new competitions, including for the College-Industry Innovation Fund, with funding awarded in 2014–15.”
- “an additional $60 million for Genome Canada to launch a new applied research competition in the area of human health, and to sustain the Science and Technology Centres until 2014–15”.
- “$10 million over two years to CIFAR.”

Some examples of “boutique” funding:

- “$5.2 million in 2012–13 to support the Canadian Depression Research and Intervention Network.”
- “$6.5 million over three years for a research project at McMaster University. The project will evaluate ways to achieve better health outcomes for patients while also making the health care system more cost-effective, through greater implementation of medical teams. Federal support will be augmented by contributions from other partners.”
- “the Government will continue to partner with the Rick Hansen Institute to support its work to achieve breakthroughs in spinal cord injury research and care.”