

My experiences at the first CIHR Trainee Brainstorming Session

Elizabeth Job
University of British Columbia

Source: Job, E. (2002). My experiences at the first CIHR Trainee Brainstorming Session. *Psynopsis: Canada's Psychology Newspaper*, 24(3), 15.

This winter, I had the privilege of attending the first annual Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Trainee Brainstorming Session in Sainte-Adele, Quebec (January 31st – February 3, 2002) This article is to inform trainees, potential trainees, and supervisors of what went on during this dynamic and unique conference.

Twenty-seven trainees and eight CIHR representatives attended the conference. Trainees were largely holders of CIHR doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships. As the only Master's level trainee, I was also one of the group who was not currently funded by CIHR. The conference was slightly dominated by trainees in the 'hard-science' disciplines, such as Biochemistry, Medicine, Chemistry, Nursing and Genetics, although there were many trainees like me who were doing research in fields such as Psychology, Anthropology, Social Work and Family Studies. Many of the trainees were based out of sites at Canadian research institutions, however there were also some training in the United States. All in all, we were a diverse group with a wide range of experiences to share.

The first session of the meeting was devoted to explaining the organizational structure of, mission behind, and opportunities provided by CIHR. For those of you like me who didn't know: CIHR was created by parliament in April 2000 with the goal of sustaining and fostering our health care system with innovative research at a national

level. CIHR is the federal funding source for health researchers; currently a community of over 5,000 researchers and thousands more trainees. The institution uses the peer-review process as a means of ensuring quality in the people and projects it supports. CIHR is structured on four pillars of science: basic research, clinical research, health policy services and systems, and population and public health. These pillars are represented in the work of the researchers who belong to the thirteen 'virtual' institutes within CIHR. Members of the Institutes are diverse: from researchers, clinicians and government agencies to industry partners, health organizations and patients. A mission of the Institutes is to foster cross-disciplinary research and keep tabs on the applied health-related needs of Canadians. Psychologists could find any number of these Institutes relevant to their work and membership is not exclusive. More information about the organization of CIHR can be read on their web site at www.cihr.ca.

The goal of the meeting was to help CIHR understand the needs and wants of trainees across North America and help CIHR generate plans to best serve those needs in the future. Considering that trainees are the largest group within the health research community, and that this was the first conference of its kind, CIHR was breaking ground by giving trainees a voice that could eventually be heard by policy makers and government officials. We weren't there to complain about how poor we were or how

badly we did in first year stats; this meeting was meant to use our personal experiences to generate creative ideas for CIHR to try and implement.

There were several themes that emerged over the weekend that I found extremely interesting and relevant to trainees in Psychology, including funding, national quality standards, knowledge translation, networking, career development, and raising the profile of research. I will spend the rest of the article discussing the most relevant theme to me: funding! In general, trainees expressed that they wanted the amount of training awards to be larger, due to increases in tuition and cost of living across many areas of the country. This problem was complicated by the fact that tuition ranges from \$1,668.30 at McGill to \$6,201 at Dalhousie. A clever idea was to fix a portion of CIHR funding that would be the same for all trainees and then have a top-up portion that would vary depending on the financial situation at each training institute. It was pointed out at the meeting from the CIHR representatives that one issue many trainees aren't aware of is that they can receive funding through an operating grant of a research supervisor. As part of the application for a CIHR operating grant, supervisors can apply and justify the project that the trainee will be working on. The annual stipend is a minimum of \$16,000 and can be for trainees of all levels from undergraduates to postdocs. Something to think about.

Other things on the funding area wish-list included a \$500 travel stipend. Post-docs were also quick to voice that they needed increased funding and the security of health, dental, childcare benefits. This was also a general consensus that the duration of the Ph.D. award, three years, was too short.

Another important initiative was the push for communication and perhaps a bonus system to attract post-docs who trained in the U.S. to come back to Canada and continue their careers. Big on my agenda was to push for funding below the doctoral level – I felt it important for CIHR to recognize that they should fund undergraduate and Master's level students in order to ensure that young trainees feel supported in pursuing a graduate career in health research. Currently, only NSERC, the federal agency that funds basic science research, invests in pre-doctoral trainees this way.

Overall, the meeting left me with a strong sense of support for and from CIHR. The representatives at the meeting did not close the conference with empty promises that everything we had suggested would be implemented in the next year, or even that they could make them all happen period. However, there was a heart-felt commitment made to lobby the concerns of trainees to upper-levels of CIHR policy-makers and a promise made to stay in touch with the goals of trainees in the trenches of research centres across North America. Certainly a strong start!

For those interested in reading more about this meeting, a full report of the CIHR Trainee Brainstorming session entitled, "Visions of the Future: Health Researchers of tomorrow speak out," is available on the CIHR web site (www.cihr.ca).

Elizabeth Job is a graduate student in clinical psychology at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses on pediatric pain assessment and management. Elizabeth is also the Secretary-Treasurer for the Students' Section of the Canadian Psychological Association.