

RESEARCH CANADA:

AN ALLIANCE FOR HEALTH DISCOVERY

Deborah Gordon-El-Bihbety discusses how **Research Canada's** new international agreement with sister organisations **Research!America**, **Research Australia** and **Research!Sweden** is shaping its global health agenda

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FIRSTLY, WHAT CHANGES HAVE OCCURRED AT RESEARCH CANADA (RC): AN ALLIANCE FOR HEALTH DISCOVERY SINCE WE INTERVIEWED YOU BACK IN 2012?

The organisation has changed its business model from a strictly member-based development and outreach-based strategy to a 'Members, Supporters and Partners' strategy that engages

organisations and companies in RC's advocacy efforts in a multitude of ways. This is to accommodate the time, resources and divergent needs that these stakeholders have. These changes have resulted in a robust advocacy programme and a healthy operational budget.

The second big change was spearheading the signing of an international agreement among RC's sister organisations, Research!America (see p 94), Research Australia and Research!Sweden. The agreement is aimed at increasing collaboration among our respective organisations and sharing best practices in health research advocacy across borders. It also lays the groundwork for possible global projects that profile and promote health research and innovation in our respective countries.

ARE THERE ANY DEVELOPMENTS THAT HAVE COME TO LIGHT ALREADY THROUGH THIS AGREEMENT SIGNED WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM RESEARCH!AMERICA, RESEARCH AUSTRALIA AND RESEARCH!SWEDEN?

We are beginning to work more closely and use each other's networks to engage champions for health research and innovation in other countries, bringing them to Canada to share their expertise. Sometimes, we appreciate the counsel and experiences of our international colleagues more than our domestic ones. We must look beyond our country for new strategies and approaches to health research advocacy in much the same way as we look to our counterparts nationally and at the provincial level. We hope to organise a more structured approach to our communication with our international colleagues over the next few years. But we have just signed the agreement so there is still much work to do.

TO RECAP, COULD YOU HIGHLIGHT RC'S CORE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES?

RC is a unique national health research advocacy organisation in that we are a multi-stakeholder alliance representing the interests of Canadians. Our members are drawn from the academic, private and voluntary

sectors. Our Advocacy through Education Program engages Members of Parliament (MPs), Canadian citizens and the media in initiatives such as a non-partisan Health Research Caucus on Parliament Hill, which invites health researchers from across the country to present their research to Parliamentarians three times a year.

Another example is our national public opinion polls, which solicit the views of Canadians on the country's health research. Either as taxpayers or donors, Canadians pay for publicly-funded health research and consequently should have a voice in the national discussion. RC also has a Policy through Partnership programme which aims to develop policy consensus among the different sectors that comprise its alliance. RC develops positions that governments can work with because the stakeholders, affected by public policy in the health research arena, are delivering a common message to Government. These are the kinds of messages that Government can act upon, and engender tremendous support from the broader health research community.

WHICH SECTORS ARE YOU WORKING ALONGSIDE TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR HEALTH RESEARCH?

RC's members, supporters and partners are drawn from the academic, private and voluntary sectors. RC's members view health research as a shared benefit and responsibility. All Canadians are its steward. And every sector – Government, academe, industry and non-governmental organisations have a role to play in building both our health research enterprise and our health innovation system in Canada.

We call it the GAIN spectrum of a robust health innovation system. RC works with every sector because it understands that if we want to support health research we must support all of the stakeholders who help to build a functional health innovation system in Canada. There are four quadrants of the system: research, development, market validation and delivery into the healthcare system or into the market. If the health research enterprise in Canada is to grow, we must make sure that all quadrants are supported, and balanced investments are made within and among them. For example, the private sector has to have the right IP and regulatory policies in place so that it will draw upon the highly qualified personnel (HQP) that our universities are producing. But that is not enough. We have to ensure that we have sustainable and predictable investments in health research and that these investments in the research quadrant are balanced with investments in research infrastructure and HQP.

COULD YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT THE HEALTH RESEARCH CAUCUS AND THE HEALTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE VISIT PROGRAM?

The Health Research Caucus is a non-partisan forum for MPs to learn more about health research and health innovation in Canada. It is chaired by a Conservative Senator because we have a Conservative government in power right now. We have two Vice-

Chairs representing the New Democrat Party, which is the Official Opposition in the Canadian Parliament and the Liberals, which is our third party in Parliament. We bring up to 20 health researchers at a time to present to Parliamentarians, in a kiosk-style event, where they have an opportunity to talk about their research one-on-one with Parliamentarians. It is strictly an educational event. Every session focuses on one area of research such as brain or pain research. We have also conducted events focused on research relating to mental health, nursing and heart health. These events are well attended and are building a strong base of support among MPs for health research.

While the Caucus brings health researchers to Parliament Hill, the Institute Visit Program brings MPs to our institutions that perform health research throughout the country. In any given jurisdiction where we may have a leading university or academic health science centre, we will invite an MP or several MPs to visit researchers at their work – in their laboratories or offices – and then tour the hospital where they can see how the research is being translated into clinic. It is usually during these visits that MPs have their epiphanies and start to connect the dots between research and patient care. It is an effective programme, which complements the Health Research Caucus initiative very well. Education is the basis of policy change. It takes time, but when it's accepted, the hearts and minds of decision makers change forever.

WHAT WILL BE THE NEXT STEPS FOR RC?

We are in a strategic planning year, so we are taking stock of the past seven years of operation and exploring opportunities and challenges for the future. We will continue to strengthen our Health Research Caucus, conduct national public opinion polls and carry out research institute visits for MPs. We will also work with our partners in the sector to develop policy positions, which influence the national discussion on health research and innovation in Canada.

We will also increasingly engage at the sub-national level. What this means is working with the Premiers of Canada's provinces whenever and wherever they gather to help reinvent the future of healthcare. Health research is the first cornerstone of an evidence-based and sustainable healthcare system. We want to assist Canada's premiers in their efforts to innovate within their provincial healthcare systems by effectively translating knowledge from health research into the clinic to improve patient care.

FINALLY, WHAT CAN EVENTS SUCH AS THE WORLD RESEARCH AND INNOVATION CONGRESS, HELD IN BRUSSELS IN JUNE, TEACH US ABOUT HEALTHCARE AND ITS FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS?

These events bring people together and, where people gather, great things can happen. Humans need to interact and they need others in their field to share their ideas and to find ways to meet their challenges. Events like this also teach us that the world view we hold in terms of our own culture, and the way we do things in our own country, is not always the only and best way to look at things. This Congress is a chance for many of us to think outside the box at a time when the world is changing rapidly; we need to change with it and look for new ways of organising our health and healthcare systems in our respective countries.

In March this year, **Research Canada** and its international partners, Research!America, Research Australia and Research!Sweden signed a letter of agreement to capitalise on their long-standing partnership by formally sharing programmes and strategies. Research!Sweden is the latest organisation to join this alliance, which has been meeting informally over the past decade.

A two-year agreement, the intention is to foster greater collaboration among the four organisations. Their objective is to 'leverage expertise, advancements and approaches in health research advocacy, as well as facilitate the sharing of best practices in biomedical and health research advocacy, governance and operational policies and procedures', and 'to make biomedical and health research higher priorities in their respective countries'.

