



What's Next in Health Research Advocacy? *Panel Presentation Proceedings*

Wednesday, June 13, 2018
10:15 a.m. – 11:55 a.m.
Sir John A. MacDonald Building
Ottawa, Ontario

- Chair:** **Dr. Rose Goldstein**
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Professor, Faculty of Medicine, McGill University
- Panelists:** **Dr. Martha Crago**
Vice-Principal, Research and Innovation, McGill University
- Mr. Shawn McGuirk**
PhD Candidate, Goodman Cancer Research Centre and McGill University
Co-President, Science & Policy Exchange
- Ms. Michelle McLean**
Senior Vice-President, Health and Wellness, Hill + Knowlton Strategies
- Ms. Vanessa Sung**
PhD Candidate, Goodman Cancer Research Centre and McGill University
Co-President, Science & Policy Exchange
- Dr. Jim Woodgett**
Director of Research, The Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute

What was your first reaction to the investments in research in the 2018 Federal Budget and what do you think comes next in terms of our research advocacy efforts?

Panelists agreed that while they were pleased with the larger than expected investments into the research ecosystem committed in Budget 2018, there are still key components missing. For example, the Research Support Fund was one of the biggest ticket items in the Expert Panel's Report but received the least amount of funding in Budget 2018. Additionally, Budget 2018 exhibited a lack of clarity regarding the use of the term, "early career investigators" and failed to include any specific detail on federal support of students and ECIs through fellowship programs.

Despite these shortcomings, panelists emphasized that it is important for the research and innovation community to acknowledge this historic investment as a big political and policy win resulting from a successful collaborative advocacy campaign; making clear that this investment is only a start and there are challenges ahead that must be addressed.

Should we continue to use the Expert Panel’s Report as our yardstick for research investments?

It has been four decades since a report similar to the Expert Panel’s Report was produced in Canada, and so this Report will undoubtedly continue to be an important tool for the research and innovation community. In particular, the Report and good data in general resonate with the current government. The Report’s attention to students and researchers is capturing this community, which is already mobilized and engaged in advocacy efforts in an attempt to greatly impact the 2019 federal election – an election that will include some of the youngest party leaders to date. Moreover, the Report offers a compelling way to present the connections between graduate scholarships and early career investigators to Parliamentarians.

We know that collaborating and coordinating advocacy approaches works well. What are some of the benefits and challenges of doing so? How can we overcome the challenges?

As the community well knows, a big part of the success of the multi-lateral campaign surrounding the Expert Panel’s Report was that there was a fairly cohesive voice amongst stakeholders. However, developing and maintaining this cohesion can be challenging, particularly as organizations must find ways to differentiate themselves while simultaneously maintaining unity. Coordinating large groups of diverse stakeholders is challenging and comes with the risk of diluting the message just to achieve unity. Moreover, some stakeholders, such as grassroots student groups, face barriers to getting involved in these discussions in the first place. The messages of health charities must be embraced and enhanced to further capitalize on the influence of public opinion on policy-making.

What are our community’s advocacy blind spots? Do you think the health research community has something else to offer the research advocacy effort that we can capitalize on in our fall advocacy efforts?

It is important to keep in mind the context in which government functions; the health research sector is often not of the view that it is “winning” on the political landscape relative to other sectors, but this sector is not the focus of politicians because it is not in crisis. This means that we must be patient and continue to produce good data and to make the political case for the return on investment into health research and innovation. Research advocates also struggle to connect with a disenfranchised middle class, being seen by much of the public as “elites” lobbying for other “elites”. However, health and healthcare is an area that the public can get behind as an advocacy strategy. Additionally, while there is excellent dialogue occurring between science and children, our community needs to find a way to promote this dialogue on a broader scale in order to get more of the public involved and engaged in health research advocacy.



For early-career researchers who are about to embark on a career in research, what should the federal government provide and what should our community do to help these researchers take their training out in the world and fulfill their potential?

The research and innovation community should work to amplify the messages of and collaborate with early-career investigators and trainees, supporting grassroots projects run by these groups and participating when invited. Trainees and early career investigators can be excellent advocates for the ecosystem, but they require support from principal investigators and institutions in the form of capacity building for advocates, such as encouraging skills development and providing space for trainees to advocate outside of research and the lab. Furthermore, as students and trainees are increasingly moving out of strictly research-based career paths (the majority of whom represent minority groups), it is important for both the community and the federal government to support trainees in research-adjacent fields, such as science journalism and science policy. These fields are important for the success of health research advocacy, but this support requires a change in the metrics of what the government considers a “good scientist” by providing funding outside of strictly lab work.

Other Key Insights from Audience Questions:

- Collaboration with health charities, which play a vital role in the research and innovation ecosystem, provides a way to access the patient voice that is critical for successful advocacy.
- It is important to embrace true inclusivity across the entire research spectrum in order to effectively reach a population that is not versed in science.
- Positioning our sector as a partner and advisor to government is necessary to effectively build long-standing relationships with policy-makers, but this requires a big shift from simply advocating for financial investment as stakeholders.
- The community must continue to work to produce data that communicate the return on investment and the value of the health research system as an economic driver.
- Given the current government’s priorities, any advocacy plan for health research and innovation must necessarily include the issue of promoting diversity and equity in academia and the broader ecosystem.

