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Perspectives in Practice

## Refreshed Strategic Plan for the Canadian Institutes of Health Research Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes



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### Introduction

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is the major federal agency responsible for funding health research in Canada. The mandate of CIHR is to excel, according to internationally accepted standards of scientific excellence, in the creation of new knowledge and its translation into improved health for Canadians, more effective health services and products and a strengthened Canadian healthcare system. Created by the government of Canada under the CIHR Act, which came into force in June 2000, CIHR is composed of 13 virtual institutes that support health research in 4 major thematic areas: basic biomedical discovery research; clinical research; health systems and services policy research; and population and public health research. The institutes support strategic extramural research undertaken across Canada, with a focus on working with key partners and stakeholders in identifying, targeting and promoting emerging areas of human health research.

The CIHR-INMD is 1 of the 13 virtual institutes that are included in the CIHR. The mandate of CIHR-INMD is to support research to enhance health in relation to diet, digestion, excretion and metabolism and to address causes, prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment, support systems and palliation for a wide range of conditions and problems associated with hormone, digestive system, kidney and liver functions.

In contrast to the other 12 institutes within CIHR, CIHR-INMD pursued a single strategic focus in the area of obesity and healthy body weight from its inception until 2009. An international review panel observed in 2011 that CIHR-INMD “has had an impact in presenting a focus for obesity research and, in that sense, has had a transformative impact on the community” (1). This conclusion was based on the results of a bibliometric analysis of obesity research

in Canada (2) and an Internal Assessment Report (3) that CIHR-INMD prepared for the Expert Review Team.

In 2010, CIHR-INMD released a new Strategic Plan 2010–2014, which broadened the CIHR-INMD strategic health research priorities from 1 to 4 (4). These priorities included: 1) food and health; 2) environments, genes and chronic disease; 3) continuum of care and 4) obesity and healthy body weight: seeking solutions. As noted in the CIHR 2011 International Review, this increase in the number and scope of strategic research priorities was viewed as a more inclusive strategy (1).

The refresh of the CIHR-INMD strategic plan extends the CIHR-INMD Strategic Plan from 2015 to 2018 and fine tunes strategic research priorities to ensure that CIHR-INMD contributes to the overall success of CIHR by aligning with CIHR’s Strategic Plan 2014–2015 to 2018–2019: HEALTH RESEARCH ROADMAP II: Capturing innovation to produce better health and healthcare for Canadians (5). The update also ensures that CIHR-INMD strategic research priorities continue to result in CIHR-INMD funding innovative, targeted research that provides immediate opportunities for implementation to improve the health of Canadians and the Canadian healthcare system in partnership with researchers, voluntary health organizations, professional associations and provincial, territorial and federal government agencies working in the CIHR-INMD mandate area.

In order to refresh the strategic plan, CIHR-INMD staff and members of the Institute Advisory Board met with partners to consult on the previous 4 strategic priorities and to seek input. In addition, data were gathered from current research funding trends, and a web-based survey was launched to ask CIHR-INMD stakeholders more broadly to provide input regarding future directions for CIHR-INMD.

After extensive consultation, it was determined that the CIHR-INMD objectives for Continuum of Care are best addressed through a large CIHR-wide initiative, the Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research (SPOR) (6) in a way that CIHR-INMD could not do alone. For this reason, Continuum of Care was removed as a standalone strategic priority in the refreshed CIHR-INMD strategic plan.

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CIHR-INMD has strongly supported the development of SPOR. The CIHR-INMD Scientific Director serves as a champion in SPOR for issues related to training and capacity development. CIHR-INMD has also played a convener role by supporting national meetings for the development of relevant SPOR networks related to chronic diseases. For example, in January 2014 CIHR-INMD hosted a national strengthening workshop focused on Diabetes and Related Complications (7). In addition, CIHR-INMD supported the Canadian Kidney Knowledge Translation and Generation Network (CANN-NET) (8,9). These efforts culminated in the recent announcement of funding for 3 of 5 national SPOR Networks in Chronic Disease that directly relate to the CIHR-INMD mandate in the areas of diabetes and related complications, chronic kidney disease and gastroenterology (10).

The 3 CIHR-INMD strategic research priorities in the refresh of the CIHR-INMD Strategic Plan include: 1) food and health; 2) environments, genes and chronic disease; and 3) obesity and healthy body weight: seeking solutions. Tackling these health research priorities will begin to address the challenges associated with the diet-environment-health trilemma (11).

### Strategic Priority 1: Food and Health

In the CIHR-INMD Strategic Plan for 2010–2014, CIHR-INMD committed to support research to develop a stronger evidence base to inform future nutrition practice and food policy. This included fostering research into the total diet and specific nutrients that enhance health and reduce the risk for chronic disease. The evaluation of biomarkers of nutritional adequacy, emerging innovations in food engineering and ethical issues posed by these changes, particularly with respect to people with vulnerabilities, were noted as priority areas for strategic research funding.

The overarching aim of this strategic priority is to foster research on food and health that results in improved nutritional status at the population level, compresses morbidity in relation to chronic disease and provides support for evidence-informed policies and practice. In advancing this Strategic Research Priority, CIHR-INMD held a national workshop, Advancing Food and Health Research Priorities, to consult with stakeholders, including representatives from government, the research community and the private sector, along with international experts who attended the workshop (12). As a result of this workshop, CIHR-INMD launched the Programmatic Grants in Food and Health in partnership with the CIHR/Rx&D Collaborative Research Program as well as Health Canada (Bureau of Nutritional Sciences, Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion, and First Nations and Inuit Health Branch); the Public Health Agency of Canada; Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; the Centrum Foundation of Pfizer Consumer Healthcare; AllerGen NCE Inc., Canada Foundation for Innovation, and The Micronutrient Initiative. This funding opportunity resulted in 6 programmatic grants in food and health being funded over a period of 5 years.

CIHR-INMD also worked closely with Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada to host a related national workshop, Developing a Research Agenda to Support Sodium Reduction (13). The outcomes of this workshop provided the basis for research recommendations contained in the Sodium Reduction Strategy for Canada (14). With the release of the Strategy, CIHR-INMD launched targeted funding opportunities to support sodium-reduction research in Canada, including 1 partnered funding opportunity with the Natural Sciences and Engineering Council of Canada.

CIHR-INMD will continue to catalyze and support international research partnerships with European countries in a Joint Programme Initiative: A Healthy Diet for a Healthy Life (JPI HDHL) (15). CIHR-INMD is CIHR's representative on the JPI HDHL manage-

ment board and has participated in several activities to facilitate transnational research collaborations in food and health and to fund in the areas of biomarkers for nutrition and health and intestinal microbiomics.

Food and Health continues to be a strategic priority for the institute. CIHR-INMD will prioritize knowledge translation activities to support new policy initiatives recently mandated by the Minister of Health that are related to nutrition labelling and dietary sodium intake.

### Strategic Priority 2: Environments, Genes and Chronic Disease

The CIHR-INMD Strategic Plan 2010–2014 outlines the need for research to identify the influence of the environment and genes on the development of chronic disease, as well as the need to acquire knowledge about the phenotypic variations of complex and rare diseases, interactions with the human microbiome, and the health consequences of changes in natural and built environments. The objectives of this strategic research priority were to enhance the knowledge base of natural environments and built environments relating to the pathobiology of both common and rare chronic diseases, to support research evaluating the role of environments in chronic disease and to advance research into rare diseases, understanding that this approach ultimately benefits the health of all Canadians.

To meet these objectives, CIHR-INMD collaborated with other CIHR institutes to support research related to various aspects of this strategic research priority, including the Canadian Microbiome Initiative, a rare-diseases research initiative, and support for the Canadian Epigenetics, Environment and Health research consortium. In addition, CIHR-INMD hosted a national Workshop on Environments, Genes and Chronic Disease (16). This workshop identified strengths, gaps and opportunities in this field of research to inform the development of relevant targeted funding opportunities.

Following the workshop, CIHR-INMD funded 21 catalyst grants in Environments, Genes and Chronic Disease in collaboration with 8 other institutes and 3 external partners. The catalyst grants covered a wide breadth of research topics, including deciphering pathways associated with tissue destruction in celiac disease, the epigenetic effects of early-life exposure to antibiotics on genes relevant to metabolic disease and immune tolerance, and early-life nutrition, antibiotics, infection and bacterial sensing in the regulation of diabetes and obesity.

CIHR-INMD also co-led the CIHR Environments and Health Signature Initiative (17), undertaken in collaboration with the CIHR Institutes of Infection and Immunity, Population and Public Health, Circulatory and Respiratory Health, and Human Development, Child and Youth Health. In November 2014, CIHR-INMD launched a funding opportunity, Programmatic Grants in Environments, Genes and Chronic Disease. This call for programmatic grants was launched in collaboration with the CIHR Institutes of Aging, Infection and Immunity, and Human Development, Child and Youth Health. The funding opportunity supports research to advance understanding of how environment-gene or environment-microbiome-gene interactions contribute to chronic, noncommunicable diseases. CIHR recently announced funding for 7 programmatic grants in partnership with Crohn's and Colitis Canada and Genome British Columbia (18). With the emergence of new "omics" technologies and increasing capacity in bioinformatics, this is a promising emerging area for new research. CIHR-INMD will continue to prioritize the impacts of environments and genes on chronic disease and to look for opportunities to collaborate with partners to support additional targeted research opportunities for the Canadian research community.

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