Is doctoral health research entering an era of austerity?

Dear Editor:

Research programs across Canada have experienced budget cuts in recent years. The budget in real dollars allocated to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) fell by 6.4% since 2009.¹ Members of the academic community have publicly denounced these cuts through various channels.²

Doctoral students working in health research are increasingly affected by these budget cuts. There exist three main funding mechanisms to channel CIHR money to doctoral students: 1) direct funding through national scholarship competition; 2) direct funding through Strategic Training Initiative in Health Research (STIHR); and 3) indirect (usually non-competitive) funding through scholarship budget embedded within operating grants. Although data for the third type are difficult to obtain, the financial resources available through the first two types appear to be declining.

In 2013, the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) expressed its concern regarding the reduced funds allocated for CIHR-supported scholarships.³ That year, the approval rate for students who submitted applications for a CIHR doctoral research award to conduct biomedical and clinical research (themes 1 & 2) was only 14% (119/852). Similarly, the approval rate for students conducting research on health systems and services as well as on social, cultural and environmental factors that affect the health of populations (themes 3 & 4) was only 14.7% (73/495).

The Canadian Government continued to reduce its support for doctoral students, following a disputed reform of the funding system that placed greater emphasis on the economic benefits of research.⁴ Indeed, the approval rates in 2014 were significantly lower compared to previous years. The approval rate for doctoral students conducting biomedical and clinical research was 11.2% (84/750). Similarly, the approval rate for doctoral students conducting research on health systems and services as well as on social, cultural and environmental factors that affect the health of populations was 11.4% (60/526). According to funding opportunity descriptions, CIHR's budgets between 2010 and 2013 for doctoral competitions for students pursuing a degree in Canada were estimated to be \$18.9 million per competition. For the 2014 and 2015 competitions, the budgets were estimated to be reduced to \$14 million per competition.

Moreover, CIHR has announced that the STIHR grants are unlikely to be renewed once the current funding expires. Since 2001, this program has been providing bursaries and inter-university training platforms to high-calibre doctoral students across Canada. Without secured CIHR funding, the viability of these platforms is uncertain. Meanwhile, almost all provincial funders have reduced their funds for doctoral and salary awards.⁵ Is

doctoral health research entering an era of austerity characterized by reduced funding? If so, how will health research across Canada be affected?

Past studies found that PhD funding predicts degree duration and completion rates.^{6,7} Through their scientific discoveries, doctoral students can concretely contribute to the progress of society and to improving health outcomes.^{8,9} For instance, doctoral students contribute to about one third of the publications in Quebec.¹⁰ Thus, doctoral bursaries can increase Canada's competitiveness internationally by fostering the development of creative research skills. Bursaries promote innovation and excellence within the next generation of Canadian health researchers. The contribution of doctoral students should be better recognized and supported by the current Canadian Government.

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