

Canadian Bioethics Research and Scholarship: A Need for Explicit Leadership and Support by Research Funders

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Aucun déclaré

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Les opinions exprimées ici sont celles de l'auteur et ne reflètent pas nécessairement celles de la revue.

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Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

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It was with much dismay that I became aware, in April 2014, of a brewing storm in the Canadian Bioethics research community over the place given to bioethics research and scholarship by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) [1,2]. I was astounded to learn that the recommendations in the Final Report of the Task Force on Ethics Reform [3] – which had been mandated by CIHR “to evaluate whether CIHR currently meets its ethics mandate and whether the current organizational structure is optimal to do so” – had been largely ignored. Instead of making bioethics “front and centre” in both CIHR’s governance structure and its support and funding of research, bioethics has become further marginalized. Instead of following the Task Force recommendations and creating a position of Vice-President of Ethics – which would have established a clear leadership role for ethics experts within this institution – the CIHR Governing Council appointed two scientists with no demonstrable bioethics expertise. Are these professionals the best choice to be “Ethics Champions” and Chair the Standing Committee on Ethics? This “slap in the face” to seasoned bioethics scholars in Canada led many of my colleagues to sign an open letter to Parliament and Senate requesting that our government “take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that the President and Chair of the Governing Council of CIHR (Alain Beaudet) is called to appear before the relevant House/Senate Committees to respond to the deficiencies with respect to ethics at CIHR.” [4]

As one of the many Canadian bioethics researchers who have received CIHR funds, I am grateful for the support over the past years, most notably from the CIHR Ethics Office, which saw value in financing my research when it was not touching on topics that were central enough to CIHR's main funding initiatives / directions. With an ever shrinking budget dedicated to the Ethics Office, and with the reform to ethics at CIHR, one can reasonably expect that many important bioethics projects will go unfunded in the future. In deploring the current poor state of bioethics funding in Canada at the federal level, I suggest that some of the blame can and should be levied at the concentration of the mandate for funding bioethics research in one federal granting council (i.e., CIHR), instead of this being a shared mandate across the Tri-Council (NSERC, CIHR, SSHRC), as I think should be the case for an interdisciplinary field like bioethics. This concentration of bioethics research funding at CIHR reinforces a narrow view of our field as one that is only or primarily focused on biomedical issues (i.e., irrelevant to the humanities and social sciences, and to engineering and the fundamental sciences) that are to be examined through empirical research (which leaves little place for funding conceptual research). This situation runs directly counter to the important shared role of the Tri-Council in developing and moving forward critical Canadian ethics guidelines (and supporting documents) such as the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2) [5] and the *Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research* (TAF-RCR) [6].

In a context of tightened provincial and federal budgets for scientific research, bioethics researchers will be competing with colleagues from other fields for ever scarcer resources – and that is as it should be. What is problematic, I suggest, is that *less* and not more space is being made to integrate ethics research funding across domains at CIHR (and NSERC and SSHRC). Lessons can and should be learned from previous targeted initiatives, some of which worked across federal and provincial funding councils, that integrated research involving ethical considerations arising from science and technology alongside basic and applied science funding. Notable examples are the national [GE3LS](#) (genomics) and Québec [NE3LS](#) (nanotech) initiatives.

At the same time, I am also in agreement with critiques of the “big science” funding approach who raise questions about conflicts of interest and the ability for bioethics scholars to engage in independent social critique of scientific research and innovations when their research is directly tied to big science projects. In such cases, the spectre of instrumentalization to justify the “ethicality” of big science needs to be taken seriously. Further, “big ethics” does not always lead to “good ethics” research. This is partly due to the time and energy that is necessarily invested in managing human resources in large-scale projects as opposed to conducting research. In addition, there is a risk of redundancy when it is felt that there is a need to present “new” ethics frameworks to justify the scope and funding of ethics projects. In other words, it is an open question whether a million dollar grant to one ethics research team is more efficient than giving ten \$100,000 grants each to different research teams [7]. A clear message from CIHR (and the other funding councils) on how to best support a diversity of bioethics research is needed to begin addressing these concerns.

I believe that more support must be given to a diversity of investigator-driven bioethics research – and not just that which complements mainstream health research – so that Canadian bioethics scholars can continue to conduct cutting-edge research that contributes to the field of bioethics specifically, and to the conduct of academic research more generally. This can only happen if funding councils like CIHR (as well as SSHRC, NSERC and their provincial counterparts) take a leadership role in supporting ethics reflection through concrete initiatives that embed ethical expertise and practice in their own governance structures, decision-making processes, and policies. Going forward, a priority should be giving ethics the place it deserves – both in governance and in research funding – if the funding councils are to be in a position to fulfill their mandates of supporting research that meets the highest academic standards of rigour, quality and integrity.

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