

Does nursing research have a future?

As elected fellows of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences, we are concerned. Having reflected on what it has taken to establish our own careers, we realize that many of us have benefited from unprecedented opportunities to obtain research training and mentorship. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Canada ramped up expenditures in health research. In 2001-02, federal funding for research activities was approximately \$950 million, and matching funds by provincial and private sector partners brought the total to \$1.19 billion. Key research agencies and programs were launched in this period, including the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2000), the Canada Foundation for Innovation (1999), the Canada Research Chairs (2000) and the Indirect Costs Program (2003). In combination, these initiatives provided for investments in infrastructure, human capital and strategic research, along with curiosity-driven research.

Such opportunities allowed us access to excellent research training programs that underscored the value of nursing research and the importance of developing a career as a researcher. Many of us received training and career funding that ensured protected time for research. The programs that specifically supported nursing research were rigorous, but not demoralizing. The success rates of the competitions were reasonable, and the demands and expectations in our academic settings were less gruelling than they are today.

Several forces are changing the landscape of scholarship in nursing. Career support awards that guarantee protected time for research are increasingly limited. Human capital has increased, and success rates for funding competitions have diminished as a result. In addition, agencies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council have stopped funding health research, and the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation is no longer directly targeting nursing research. If we are to ensure the success of the next generation of researchers in nursing, we need to consider what is required for supporting them and ensuring their careers are productive. Much of the momentum that has been gained in nursing scholarship may be lost unless specific strategies are soon put into place.

Doctoral training is an issue of particular concern. We must ensure that the best students are attracted to these programs, that these students have the requisite resources to focus their

undivided attention on their studies and that the programs are of top quality. Given the increasing numbers of nursing PhD programs in Canada and the shortage of nursing educators globally, there will be numerous career opportunities available for outstanding students. However, we need appropriate scholarship support to attract them to doctoral training and help them succeed academically. Our research programs, particularly the PhD programs, must provide intensive training and exposure to the highest calibre of researchers. Our PhD students require active mentorship as they pursue research careers, and we must make sure that they are adequately prepared for the increasingly competitive process of securing funds for training and research operations. High-quality training requires exposure to a variety of disciplines and a wide range of research methods. It requires appropriate infrastructure support — namely, equipment, office and laboratory space, consultants and collaborators. These resources are not currently available in all settings that offer PhD programs. We must begin to discuss strategies for ensuring that PhD training and postdoctoral opportunities continue to meet the highest standards.

As the profession expands its doctoral programs without a commensurate increase in resources to support that expansion, and as more nursing scholars compete for a diminishing funding pool, future nursing scholars and researchers will struggle for opportunities to develop their careers and to generate knowledge for the discipline.

To secure the advancement of nursing research and knowledge development for the discipline and profession, we require a national strategy that will bolster training and career opportunities. Our profession relies on evidence to verify that nurses are providing the highest quality of care. Unless we continuously revitalize this evidence base through research, our profession will be in jeopardy. Now is the time to create partnerships for solidifying a strategy to guarantee the future of nursing research.

We call on our national nursing organizations to establish a secretariat that will develop a strategic plan for ensuring that nursing research is adequately supported. We encourage all nurses to start a dialogue on this topic and advocate for nursing research in their interactions with funding agencies, health-care establishments and academic institutions. ■

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