



June 11th, 2014

Dr. Jane E. Aubin, Ph.D.
Chief Scientific Officer and Vice-President,
Research and Knowledge Translation
Canadian Institutes of Health Research

Dear Dr. Aubin,

Thank you for your letter, dated June 5th, in which you referred to the special session on ethics leadership at CIHR, held at the Canadian Bioethics Society (CBS) meeting in Vancouver on May 30th, 2014.

This special session was well attended, demonstrating the importance this question has for the CBS membership. The exchanges were indeed honest and, again, I thank you for your openness and willingness to discuss these important matters with the Canadian bioethics community and for attending the entire conference.

As you were able to see, several members of the Canadian bioethics community are greatly preoccupied by the approach privileged by the CIHR, seeking to integrate ethics at every level rather than rely on the leadership of a recognized leader in the field of bioethics, such as recommended by the Task Force on Ethics Reform at CIHR. CIHR's approach to ethics leadership is felt by many in the field to undermine the notion of expertise in ethics and there is concern that this approach will disperse rather than strengthen ethics leadership at CIHR. Indeed, several examples were given by those speaking from the floor of the deteriorating situation with respect to ethics at CIHR. This is seen to be of major concern particularly since CIHR has a legal obligation to have a strong and substantive ethics programme as part of its broader mandate to improve the health of all Canadians.

Several times during your presentation and during the question period you insisted on the fact that you championed ethics at CIHR and this support is much appreciated. However, as one participant underlined, having a champion for ethics does not imply strong leadership in ethics. Non expert champions and external advisors may be important but they do not preclude the need for in-house scientific experts providing leadership. On this point, it is interesting to note that none of the other principal areas in CIHR's mandate rely exclusively on non-expert champions or advisors.

The Canadian bioethics community remains concerned and invites further discussion and collaboration with CIHR on the question of ethics leadership. In your presentation you further invited the Canadian bioethics community to hold CIHR accountable in terms of the integration of ethics in its processes with the development of metrics to measure the impact of what is being done relative to ethics governance. The CBS membership welcomes discussions on how to strengthen the relationship between the CBS and CIHR and to clarify how this follow-up could be conducted specifically.



I was very much impressed by your willingness to engage with the Canadian bioethics community at the CBS conference on the delicate question of ethics leadership at CIHR. I trust you will be open to further collaboration on this fundamental matter.

Sincerely,

Ghislaine Cleret de Langavant
President of the Canadian Bioethics Society