



November 25, 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,

You may recall that we corresponded last June, following your participation at the special session on ethics leadership at CIHR, held at the Canadian Bioethics Society (CBS) meeting in Vancouver on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

As mentioned previously, the CBS membership appreciated your willingness to discuss the question of ethics reform at CIHR. However, as clearly stated in the special session, CIHR's approach to ethics leadership is felt by many in the Canadian bioethics community to undermine the notion of expertise in ethics analysis and there is concern that CIHR's approach will diminish rather than strengthen ethics leadership at CIHR. This is problematic when one considers that CIHR is the only Canadian agency with an explicit health ethics mandate written in legislation (Canadian Institutes of Health Research Act (S.C. 2000, c. 6)).

It is still not clear to the CBS membership why CIHR chose to ignore the recommendations made by the Task Force on Ethics Reform at CIHR, composed of highly respected scholars in Canadian bioethics. This lack of clarity does not encourage the development of a strong, constructive collaboration between CIHR and the Canadian bioethics community, which would, clearly, be of mutual interest. It would be very helpful if CIHR could provide a formal, articulated rationale for its response to the Task Force.

During the special session, you sought to appease the concerns of those present by insisting on the fact that you "championed" ethics. If "championing" refers to your intent to assure high standards of ethics review at CIHR, then I am sure everyone applauds this. However, I hope you will agree that intent, in and of itself, is clearly not equivalent to expertise. Intent is a necessary, but insufficient requirement for ethics leadership. If intent was all that was required, there would be no need for university graduate programs and professional training in ethics. In our current context, ethics expertise is understood to require extensive, formal knowledge of ethics analysis of the particular subject area (in this case research ethics), discourse and process.

You encouraged the CBS membership to hold the CIHR accountable in terms of the integration of ethics in its processes and to devise a means to measure the impact of what is being done relative to ethics governance. Although this would clearly be useful, we believe that it is first and foremost important to reestablish a relationship of trust and understanding between our organizations to serve Canadians best in terms of sound, transparent and quality ethics governance for research conducted in Canada. Indeed, let us seek to establish a fruitful collaboration to ensure that ethics is at the forefront of the work conducted at CIHR.

I am available to meet with you, alone or accompanied by a few respected colleagues, to discuss these important matters in a collegial way. I could come to Ottawa at your convenience or meet with you in Montreal if per chance you have the opportunity to come my way.

Sincerely,

Ghislaine Cleret de Langavant  
President of the Canadian Bioethics Society