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# CSBMCB President's Report

Dr. Eric Brown

## Introduction

It's a pleasure to provide the President's report for the 50th year of the CSBMCB for the 2006 edition of the Bulletin. The Bulletin, as it turns out, has been around almost as long as the CSBMCB, and the 50th anniversary has been an occasion to have a look back at some early and dog-eared issues of the society's yearly publication. What's been most fascinating about that look back for me is how little things have changed. The CSBMCB has apparently always concerned itself with communication among biochemists (and the like), putting on great meetings, celebrating top scientists accomplishments and facilitating advocacy. It was regarding the latter, in particular the issue of science funding in Canada, that I was struck by how little had changed in many years.

It seems that Canadian scientists have always done much with very little, and frequently have written about their frustrations with science policy in this country. We have been grappling this past year with depressingly low success rates - about 16% - for the CIHR operating grants competition as a result of an indefinite freeze in research budgets by a new minority Conservative government. Particularly unsettling is that these freezes are in the face of huge federal financial surpluses. How this measures up historically is hard for me to say, but I would suggest that we are living and researching in a special time. It seems to me that Canada is faced today with an extraordinary opportunity to follow through with remedies that were begun in the late eighties to stem the brain drain, to shore up health research and to steady the growth of a knowledge-based economy.

In the past several years, the federal government has invested heavily in new science infrastructure through the Canada Foundation for Innovation, and in investigators through the Canada Research Chairs program. We are now poised to make good

on the vision for a strong research presence in Canada's health care system. We are in an excellent position to contribute to an innovative and knowledge-based economy that will sustain Canada in the face of increasingly cheap off-shore labour and a struggling manufacturing sector. And we can surely lead internationally in science and technology for the growing and world-wide environmental movement. What are needed, of course, are significant increases in CIHR and NSERC operating funds. This year has been a particularly busy one for the CSBMCB Executive, and much of the effort has been in advocacy, especially letter-writing, telephone calls, post-card campaigns and intense internal discussion about how best to get this message to the public, bureaucrats and politicians. While I am optimistic that we and others may be making some headway on this agenda, I am certain that biochemists, molecular and cellular biologists will always need to be vigilant about advocacy. So cheers to CSBMCB on its 50th birthday, and may its Bulletin continue to be a forum for dialogue, dissent and diatribe for the next 50 years.



## Science Policy and Advocacy

The CSBMCB Executive has been very busy with advocacy efforts in the past year. A significant development in science policy in 2006 was a review of CIHR by a panel of international experts chaired by Regius Professor of Medicine John Bell of Oxford University. The report offered some considerable praise of the CIHR's accomplishments to date, as well as some very insightful observations, analysis and recommendations for the future of CIHR. The changes suggested are substantive and resonate, in my view, with much of the senti-

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ment that exists at the grass roots of biomedical research in Canada. The CSBMCB Executive responded with a letter to president of the CIHR to underline the many the recommendations including, for example, addressing the deficit of basic researchers on Governing Council, abandoning the concept of pillars in recognition of the continuity of health research, and increasing the proportion of funding allocated to investigator-initiated grants.

By far the most important issue in advocacy this year for the CSBMCB Executive has been the freeze in federal research budgets that hit the CIHR particularly hard. This freeze meant that the funding available to last fall's competitions decreased by approximately 30%, drastically reducing both funding levels and success rates. The Executive wrote letters to the Prime Minister and Health Minister, and put out a call to the membership for grass-roots letter-writing. We posted a "how to" blurb on writing your MP on the CSBMCB website, and were copied on many letters written to government. Indeed, among the more enlightened and entertaining dialogue that I saw on this was from Alan Davidson at the University of Toronto, who suggested to his colleagues that they had better not complain for one second about not getting their grant if they hadn't written to their MP. Thanks to Alan and everyone else who wrote letters.

Perhaps the best news of the fall 2006 was the release of a report by the federal Standing Committee on Finance, which included a recommendation to increase the CIHR budget by \$350 million over three years. Most recently, and at the time of writing of this report (March 2007), it is looking unlikely that the government will act on this recommendation for the coming budget. In the past couple of weeks the CSBMCB has given a push to an effort that began in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, to send post-cards to the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Health, Industry and Finance. The initiative has a goal of 10,000 cards from across Canada to encourage the government to move forward on its Standing Committee on Finance recommendations. Fingers crossed...

## **Relationship with Canadian Federation for Biological Sciences**

The CSBMCB is not formally part of the Canadian Federation for Biological Sciences, but supports its efforts in advocacy on behalf of all of the biological sciences in Canada. To this end, the CSBMCB pays a per member levy and is afforded a seat at the table among CFBS's membership. In addition to the levy, the CSBMCB has had an office contract with the CFBS for its administrative needs. These dollars, along with those of other member organizations, support CFBS infrastructure, an Ottawa office including administrative assistance and a part-time professional advocate, Art Olson. The scale of the representation by CFBS in terms of membership is considerably greater than that of the CSBMCB and thus important when one considers the impact of advocacy efforts. Hence a coalition among biological scientists makes sense for advocacy. Nevertheless, a long-time concern among the Executive of the CSBMCB has been an emphasis by CFBS on running scientific meetings at the expense of attention to the administrative and advocacy needs of the CSBMCB. An argument can be made that the CFBS meetings serve a demand among much smaller member societies that could not put on meetings themselves. More importantly, however, the CFBS would not be sustainable in its current form without these conferences.

The CSBMCB Executive has frequently debated in recent years the merits of pulling out of the CFBS and seeking other avenues for satisfying its administrative needs and advocacy goals. These discussions reached a turning point this fall when the Executive approved a motion to terminate its office contract with the CFBS and seek alternative administrative arrangements. A remaining issue is therefore how to proceed on advocacy. Should the CSBMCB continue to fund the advocacy efforts of the CFBS? Are there other avenues for the best use of our advocacy dollars? In my own view, the best outcome would involve a workable plan for cooperation among a coalition of societies where the focus is solely on advocacy. In the past few

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years, I have witnessed a tremendous amount of energy and resolve among the Executive and membership of the CSBMCB regarding advocacy, and I am confident that the right path will ultimately be taken. Now is clearly a good time for some measured rethinking of our approaches.

### **Upcoming CSBMCB Meetings**

The 50th Annual Meeting will be held Thursday July 5 to Monday July 9, 2007 at McGill University. The theme of the meeting is "Systems and Chemical Biology" and it will feature a sizeable international presence in a variety of scientific sessions spanning systems and small molecule approaches in biology. This year the CSBMCB has plans for a particularly special meeting to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Society. David Thomas (Past-President) and I are co-Chairs for this meeting, and have the support of a talented meeting planner, Nancy Dufour, and a lively organizing committee who have put together a really terrific program. The 2008 Annual Meeting will be held at the Banff Centre Thursday March 6 to Sunday March 9. The meeting has the tentative title "Chromatin Structure, Function and Dynamics" and will be Chaired by Jim Davie from the University of Manitoba. The 2009 meeting is scheduled for the Toronto area. Stay tuned for a date and a theme.

### **CSBMCB Awards**

One of the most important roles of the CSBMCB, in my opinion, is to celebrate excellence among our members. In 2006, Joe Casey, University of Alberta, was the recipient of the Merck Frosst Prize. The prize is an early career award (less than 10 years as an independent investigator) that is given annually to a biochemist, molecular or cellular biologist who has made extraordinary research progress. Frances Sharom, University of Guelph, received the Jeanne Manery Fisher Memorial Award for scientific achievements by an eminent woman scientist. The awardees gave terrific talks at the 2006 meeting in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and are also featured later in this issue of the Bulletin for their outstanding contributions to research.

### **New CSBMCB Website**

The CSBMCB has a new website. The website

project has been ongoing for some time and we are delighted that the new site has now become operational. It's a great new look and has terrific functionality that includes links for advocacy, meetings, society awards, on-line membership renewal and lots of other good stuff. Many thanks are owed to Vince Duronio, our Treasurer, who led this onerous initiative, and to all of the CSBMCB executive members who were contributors to the effort. With the new website in place, we are planning on a new membership drive for 2007.

### **Thank You(s)**

It's been a very rewarding year as President of the CSBMCB and I owe a debt of gratitude to number of people for their support. I am grateful for the administrative support of Wafaa Antonious, the CFBS Manager, and her Assistant Laila Raid. These activities are critical support for communications, finance, membership and annual meetings. Thanks also to Stephen Lau who was the point-person on our website changes. And many thanks to Nancy Dufour who expertly coordinated with all of these folks and others to help us prepare for the 50th Annual Meeting.

I am very grateful to have been handed this post with things in fine shape on account of the hard work of David Thomas, Past President. Indeed, as a relatively inexperienced leader, I have been particularly lucky to be sandwiched between David and Vice President Reinhart Reithmeier, and I have taken advantage of their experience and common sense on a regular basis. Vince Duronio has been huge asset in the past year doing his duties as Treasurer but also in spearheading the website overhaul. Frances Sharom has, as always, done an expert job in looking after the Bulletin and has been an experienced anchor on the organizing committee of the upcoming meeting in Montreal. I am grateful to Albert Clark for preparing meeting minutes and taking care of the awards details. Thanks also to Councillors Dev Mangroo, Linda Penn and John Orlowski - you folks have been great fun to work with. Finally I want to say a special thanks to Joe Casey (President 2004/2005), who left the Executive this fall after several stellar years of service.