

HEALTH INNOVATION: Stepping up to Leadership



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During a recent presentation to the Canadian Medical Association the Honourable Rona Ambrose, Federal Minister of

Health, highlighted the importance of innovation and research as a key forward strategy to improve efficiencies and cost-effectiveness, and sustain the Canadian health system. As the Minister noted, with the public investment in health at a federal level now over \$30 billion a year, it is "worthy of federal leadership". The human talent is already there in abundance: the collective skills of an entire publically-funded industry that includes hundreds of thousands of highly educated and expertly skilled professionals who can define and deliver best value to patients from the health dollar, develop and test innovative health solutions from 'first-in-human' research studies and randomized clinical trials, and translate the best of the new knowledge into the latest and best standards of health care. It is not the raw talent that is missing, it is an organizational structure.

Frameworks are emerging, such as the Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research being championed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. However, many health innovations in Canada are failing to mature and be translated into the health system because there is no effective receptor mechanism. Provinces such as Ontario do have functioning post-market assessment offices that screen new innovations, particularly in medical devices, to generate evidence-based assessments of their readiness and cost-effectiveness for translation into care. However, this ability to pull forward innovations should ideally extend much earlier into the discovery pipeline. An excellent vehicle through which Federal leadership of health innovation could be established would be the creation of a Federal Health Innovation Fund. Such a fund

would select discoveries that had been validated for positive patient and health system impact through standard clinical research designs in our academic hospitals and universities, and rigorously evaluate their performance in a real life setting at the point of health care. The concept is not exactly new. The National Health Service in the UK has for many years operated regional Innovation Centres whose role is to identify and develop future innovations for implementation across the public health system. While the federal government has stressed the important role of the private sector as an R&D partner, it is equally important that our health system has the ability to 'lift' innovations over the finishing line.

Championing our system of health and health research as a cradle of innovation can be a role for municipal government also, not just

federal and provincial legislations. After all, the sector is a major local employer of highly skilled labour in all Canadian cities that host academic hospitals and university faculties with a health mandate. Innovation in health creates high quality jobs and attracts individuals who give back to their communities in municipal taxes, support for entertainment and the arts, and local philanthropy. Communities take pride in hosting top-class hospitals directly benefiting them as individuals. This has long been recognized in my own community of London, Ontario, which hosts Western University, the Lawson Health Research Institute, Robarts Research Institute and two major hospitals, London Health Sciences Centre and St Joseph's Health Care. Recently, the City of London showed leadership by directly investing in health innovation through the creation of

a \$10 million Innovation and Commercialization Fund. The intent of this fund is to kick-start health innovation, particularly in the fields of orthopaedics, medical devices and diagnostic imaging; areas where London already has a track record of excellence. The challenge from the City to the health research community is to leverage the fund up to \$80 million through partnerships with industry and other levels of government, and to deliver at least 350 new jobs over 10 years. Health innovation has been designated as an engine of municipal growth, and a key strategy to create local wealth and build a 'creative community'. Success in London will be success for Canada. While the rediscovery of a leadership role in health innovation by the Federal government is to be applauded, this quest can truly be a partnership amongst all stakeholders.