

Seven Score Operating Grants

By Jim Oldfield

In the most difficult operating grant competition in years, seven scientists from Sunnybrook Research Institute (SRI) were awarded funding totaling \$3.6 million by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). The grants were awarded by CIHR based on its September 2009 funding competition.

While the average yearly amount of awards in this competition increased to \$139,000, only 18% of applications were funded, down from 22% or more over the last six operating grant competitions.

“Against this backdrop of increasing scarcity of funds, the success of these SRI scientists is that much more commendable,” said Dr. Michael Julius, vice-president, research, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. “Congratulations are due to them. It must be noted, however, there are many other researchers at SRI who are as dedicated to discovery and its translation, a lack of available funds notwithstanding.”

New to this round was CIHR's inclusion of randomized controlled trials in the eligibility criteria for operating funding. The change is part of an effort by CIHR to provide more stable, long-term funding for promising treatments that require clinical evaluation.

Accordingly, the agency awarded Dr. David Gladstone, a clinician-scientist in the Brain Sciences Research Program at SRI and an assistant professor in the department of medicine at the University of Toronto, \$1.7 million over five years for the SPOTLIGHT trial. This national, multicentre study will test an innovative image-guided treatment protocol for the emergency management of intracerebral hemorrhage, the most deadly and disabling type of stroke, which is caused by sudden bleeding into the brain from a ruptured blood vessel. The researchers will incorporate a novel imaging marker (the “spot sign”) developed at Sunnybrook by the study’s co-principal investigator Dr. Richard Aviv that can identify, for the first time, the patients most likely to benefit from a promising drug therapy that has so far produced mixed results in clinical testing.

Dr. Dennis Ko, a scientist in the Schulich Heart Research Program, was awarded \$455,119 over three years for his study on the appropriateness of cardiac procedures to improve blood flow to the heart. Ko's research group has shown that use of angioplasty and bypass surgery has increased dramatically in Canada over the past decade; at the same time, other research has questioned whether all these procedures were necessary, because many of the patients were symptom-free and therefore likely did not benefit from them. Ko's project will be one of the first in Canada to assess the appropriateness of these costly cardiac interventions.

Other SRI researchers receiving funding are:

- Dr. Greg Czarnota, a scientist in the Odette Cancer Research Program: \$304,194 over three years to investigate ultrasound-activated microbubble enhancement of response to radiation therapy.
- Dr. Jean Gariépy, an imaging scientist newly recruited by SRI from the University Health Network: \$429,960 over five years to search for cellular targets that can disrupt deadly natural molecules known as ribosomal-inactivating proteins.
- Dr. Jonathan Rast, a scientist in the Odette Cancer Research Program: \$100,000 for one year for his project on a novel system of toll-like receptors in a gene regulatory network underpinning innate immunity.
- Dr. Baiju Shah, a scientist in the Schulich Heart Research Program: \$102,135 over two years for his study on the influence of language and ethnicity on stroke care.
- Dr. Burton Yang, a senior scientist in the Odette Cancer Research Program: \$584,595 over five years for his project on the roles of microRNA miR-17-3p in wound healing and angiogenesis.

Results from CIHR's March 2010 operating grant competition will be available in late June or early July.