

CIHR's face-to-face about-face

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Repudiating recommendations from two expert working groups, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is abandoning a set of controversial peer-review reforms adopted two years ago.

Those reforms radically reduced face-to-face panels, which enabled discussion among scientists who were assessing funding proposals. It replaced them with “virtual review” technologies.

In a [July 10 update](#) on CIHR's forthcoming project grant competition, CIHR Acting President Dr. Roderick McInnes stated, “we must return to face-to-face grants panels for the evaluation of the project grants.”

He said 53 panels will be struck. “Altogether, the panels will cover the full spectrum of health research. As with the historical CIHR grants panels, each will have a name, mandate, and a face-to-face meeting,” wrote McInnes.

Previously, about 80% of all grant applications were reviewed by about 50 panels.

McInnes was not available for an interview this week.

CIHR's elimination of face-to-face panels was strongly opposed in a [June 2016 open letter](#) to federal Minister of Health Dr. Jane Philpott that was signed by more than 1000 scientists and written by Jim Woodgett, scientific director of Toronto's Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute. Subsequent to the letter, Woodgett says “a working group was struck to find some sort of remedy, but was hamstrung by their recommendations needing to be implementable quickly and without abandoning virtual review.”

In September 2016, CIHR's hastily convened Peer Review Working Group [issued a report](#) that agreed with CIHR's decision to [substantially abandon face-to-](#)



CIHR is abandoning its contentious virtual peer-review process.

[face panels](#). The report stated that “discussing 100% of the applications at the face-to-face committees would not be possible.” The group recommended CIHR use face-to-face panels for 40% of reviews after the rest were culled without face-to-face discussion.

In January 2017, the reduction in the number of face-to-face panels was endorsed by a second expert working group, this one comprised of international experts convened by CIHR. In its [February 2017 report](#), the [expert working group concluded](#), based in part on an unreleased manuscript by Robyn Tamblin, scientific director of CIHR's Institute of Health Services and Policy Research, that evidence suggests “that peer review in its traditional face-to-face format is

subject to biases based on individual characteristics.”

The new decision to reinstate all the face-to-face panels “will be a real boost in morale for the research community,” says Peter Jones, Canada Research Chair in Functional Foods and Nutrition at the University of Manitoba.

As a member of CIHR's College of Reviewers, [Jones sharply questioned](#) the Peer Review Working Group's recommendation that face-to-face peer review panels be substantially reduced.

“This new decision is a good thing, regardless of who said what and when,” Jones says, “although it's left egg on the faces of some.”

Paul Webster, Toronto, Ont.