Opinion

There are no overnight successes in science: medical research needs more stable funding

Canada needs to adjust its approach to funding in order to support moonshot ideas that could make a major difference.

BY MICHAEL SEFTON

The rollout of the first bivalent COVID shots is a reminder that the development of these vaccines ranks among the greatest public health achievements of our lifetimes. But they also showcase the gap that exists between perception and reality when it comes to scientific advances—and how we fund them.

The vaccines are frequently said to have been developed in a 10-month scientific sprint, but the truth is most of the key research stretches back 30 years. Hungarian biochemist Katalin Kariko began working on the mRNA technology on which the vaccines depend in the late 1980s. Though she faced her fair share of scientific setbacks, her biggest challenge was finding stable institutional support and funding for an idea that was ahead of its time.

Kariko’s experience will be a familiar one to many research scientists, whose labs are constantly chasing their next grant. Major bodies like the Canadian Institutes of Health Research are charged with directing scarce public money to support scientific work that’s most likely to yield impactful results. The CIHR is an independent agency established in 2000 and is accountable to Parliament through the Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

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Canada already has some of the world’s best institutions and scientific minds. Rethinking how we fund our most ambitious research projects is the final piece of the puzzle. It’s not easy to put dollars on big, bold ideas. But it’s worth doing because the ones that succeed—like the COVID vaccines, insulin, and Alzheimer’s—will change lives for the better.

But Canada needs a funding system that can support research with a 10- to 15-year horizon, and which can adapt and pivot to support success. To ensure public funds are spent wisely we need rigorous checks and balances, but if projects are progressing and showing promise, there should be mechanisms for continued funding.

The other side of this coin is that sometimes things won’t work out. Both scientists and governments have to get more comfortable with the idea that some—maybe most—moonshots will not work and be upfront in explaining to the public why it was worth trying anyway. Even “failed” experiments teach us something.

Our obstacle is not the science, the expertise, or the technology; it’s stable support over an extended period to see these projects through clinical trials and regulatory review and into the clinic.

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Entrepreneurs so their careers can grow in Canada. It can also protect the made-in-Canada intellectual property for development of biomedical technology, therapies, medicines, and applications. Once fully tested, these assets can drive enormous economic impact in Canada, such as high-paying jobs, long-term research, and commercial-scale manufacturing on a similar scale to hubs in the United States and Europe.

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