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Editorial

The Impact of COVID-19 on Diabetes Research in Canada



On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Since that time, the world has undergone a transformational change, with most governments across the globe rapidly deploying strategies that they believe will best protect their citizens. In Canada, our federal and provincial governments established isolation requirements, defined which businesses were considered to supply essential services, established guidance for workplaces and imposed restrictions on schools and universities, business activities, social gatherings and travel. Thus, much like the majority of people from countries around the world, Canadians found themselves trying to adapt to a new situation that left very few aspects of their daily lives unaffected. In a similar way, health-care professionals and researchers across the country were left to find ways to continue to provide key and essential services in this new and rapidly changing landscape.

In order to assist with the immediate need to fight COVID-19, the Canadian federal government has recently dedicated more than \$1 billion to support research focused on COVID-19. While this funding is critical to assist Canadian researchers to further understand and possibly treat COVID-19, the continuation of other research projects cannot be set aside. Indeed, although the current pandemic is a serious medical concern, this does not change the fact that existing medical conditions, such as diabetes, continue to be a major cause of morbidity and mortality throughout the world. Thus, the ongoing research programs focused on better understanding and treating diabetes and other chronic diseases must continue despite the significant headwinds that researchers are currently facing during these tumultuous times. Added to this, emerging evidence has indicated that poorer outcomes with COVID-19 may occur in those individuals with chronic medical conditions (1) such as diabetes (2). Thus, continuation of ongoing research projects involving diabetes, as well as new projects examining how diabetes affects patients with COVID-19, are essential to the health of Canadians and global populations.

Similarly to how each government around the world has a different approach to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the universities and research institutes across Canada also appear to be responding differently in terms of the restrictions placed on research activities. In addition to these diverse responses, the universities' restrictions and guidelines appear to be in constant flux as new information is provided or the regional and provincial effect of COVID-19 changes. Anecdotally, these restrictions range from almost complete stoppage of research projects (with the exception of COVID-19 research) to relatively normal research activities with

minor modifications to meet the standards of new workplace guidelines and social distancing restrictions.

The need to continue ongoing research in all fields, including diabetes, cannot be overstated. For diabetes research, funding agencies in Canada, such as Diabetes Canada, Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation Canada and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research have invested millions of dollars into research and the majority of these research projects cannot simply be paused while we wait for the COVID-19 pandemic to be brought under control. Indeed, stopping many of these projects would be catastrophic, as in the cases of participants in clinical trials, or preclinical research programs with long-term animal projects in the works. Pausing these projects would jeopardize the integrity of the resulting data. If this occurs, millions of dollars in funding could be wasted, leaving important research questions unresolved and essentially setting back diabetes research in Canada by years. This has obvious implications for funding agencies, donors and researchers as well as the health of those people currently dealing with diabetes. Thus, despite this COVID-19 pandemic and the need to protect the health of Canadians, a measured and sensible balance must be found that protects our citizens from this immediate health concern, but also allows diabetes research to continue. If this approach is adopted, Canadian researchers can assist in helping to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, but also protect the long-term health of Canadians at risk of developing diabetes and those who currently have diabetes.

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