

Researchers vulnerable to outside pressure, report says

Toronto Globe and Mail, Friday, November 19, 2004

By ANDRÉ PICARD
PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTER

Clinical faculty -- the thousands of Canadian researchers and physicians who split their time between universities and hospitals -- are woefully lacking in job security and so vulnerable to outside pressure that their ability to do good research is compromised, a new report says.

The task force that came to that conclusion says the solution is to grant clinical faculty the same protections as university professors, including tenure, secure incomes and the right to form unions.

If implemented by Canada's 16 medical schools, the recommendations released yesterday could dramatically change how leading Canadian researchers are paid, and alter their freedom to speak out on controversial issues.

The report argues that the combination of funding shortfalls and increasing pressure to do research that produces profitable, commercial products means that "room for independent thought, action and critical examination . . . is disappearing," says the report, prepared by a panel headed by Philip Welch, a medical geneticist and retired professor of pediatrics at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

The report argues that "academic freedom is the life blood of modern universities and, by extension, their affiliated health care institutions" so clinical faculty, like academic faculty, should have the right to "teach, study and publish regardless of prevailing opinion, prescribed doctrine or institutional preferences."

And clinical faculty should have the right to create staff associations, or unions, and participate fully in academic bodies, it says.

About 4,000 clinical faculty, who are the equivalent of full-time professors, work in Canada's 16 schools of medicine and teaching hospitals. There are another 10,000 to 15,000 part-time clinical faculty, most of them physicians who teach medical students and train interns and residents.

The report was commissioned by the Canadian Association of University Teachers after the high-profile case of Nancy Olivieri, a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto and a researcher at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children.

When Dr. Olivieri discovered unexpected risks in a new drug she was helping develop for a blood disorder, she moved to inform patients and to publish the negative results, leading the drug company sponsoring the research to cut off funding and threaten legal action.

When she turned to the hospital and university for help, Dr. Olivieri was rebuffed and her career was almost destroyed. Because she was a clinical faculty member, she had no contractual protection, no tenure, no faculty association to turn to for help and no access to dispute resolution mechanisms in the institutions where she worked.

"The Olivieri case has come to symbolize the precarious nature of academic freedom of clinical faculty," the report says.

The Medical Reform Group of Ontario welcomed the report as a "wakeup call."

"The report proposes much-needed solutions to these growing problems," a spokesman for the group, Dr. P. J. Devereaux, said in a statement. "Doctors who are threatened need arbitration procedures that protect them. They need backing and support when attacked by powerful institutions."