Summary of the Evaluation of ISED Funding to the Stem Cell Network

Audit and Evaluation Branch

Senior Management Committee – March 2021

BACKGROUND

Stem cells, one of the available tools in the evolving area of regenerative medicine, are biological cells with the unique ability to develop into any cell and repair damaged and diseased tissue or organs in the human body. The Stem Cell Network (SCN) is a national, not-for-profit corporation dedicated to enabling the translation of stem cell research into clinical applications, commercial products and public policy. The SCN supports three main activities: (1) Research funding programs; (2) Training programs; and (3) Outreach and engagement.

The network was established in 2001 through the Government of Canada's Tri-Council Networks of Centres of Excellence (NCE) program. In 2016, funding to the SCN transitioned from the NCE to Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED). ISED's contribution to the SCN ($36 million over six years since 2016-17) is geared towards the long-term outcome of advancing stem cell research to strengthen Canada's economy and the health of Canadians.

METHODOLOGY

The objectives of this evaluation were to assess: the relevance; the performance outcome areas, including: (1) outreach and engagement, (2) networking, (3) training, (4) translational research and (5) international standing; and the efficiency of ISED's funding to the SCN, in accordance with the Treasury Board Secretariat *Policy on Results*.

The evaluation covered the period from April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2020. Prior to the 2016, NCE funding to the SCN was provided via competition grants on a project-by-project basis. Therefore only two mid-term reviews have been conducted for the SCN.

Multiple lines of evidence were used to support the evaluation:

- Data Analysis
- Document Review
- Literature Review
- Interviews

FINDINGS

Relevance

There is a continued need for multidisciplinary and collaborative stem cell research due to its potential to lead to innovative therapies and treatments for chronic and degenerative diseases as well as the resulting economic benefits. The SCN is the only national organization in Canada with a sole focus on supporting stem cell research along with the training and career development of future stem cell researchers. However, the time-limited nature of ISED-SCN funding agreements can impact the SCN's ability to secure long-term funding from other sources.

Performance

The SCN has helped increase networking and collaboration among researchers domestically and internationally, particularly through the annual Till and McCulloch Meeting and the multidisciplinary requirements of SCN-funded projects. The network continues to expand the breadth and depth of knowledge related to stem cells, and the ethical, legal and social implications, by funding innovative research projects, supporting research publications in high impact journals, and sponsoring SCN researchers to present their findings at national and international workshops and conferences. This in turn enhances Canada's international standing and leadership in the stem cell and regenerative medicine fields. The SCN enables the career development and research opportunities of trainees, which contributes to a pipeline of qualified researchers that remain in Canada to pursue higher education and employment positions within all areas of Canada's stem cell and regenerative medicine sector. Lastly, through support and targeted funding for translational research, SCN-funded research has led to clinical trials, the development of patent applications, and the establishment and enhancement of start-up companies.

Efficiency

ISED funding has supported the SCN in leveraging partner funding and in developing a multidisciplinary and collaborative stem cell research network throughout Canada. The SCN is deemed to have a fair and transparent governance and reporting structure. Early efforts on equity, diversity and inclusion have supported an inclusive delivery model. Although alternative models of delivering government support to stem cell researchers are possible, the majority of interviewees noted they would not be as effective in supporting national-level research efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the evaluation did not produce any recommendations.