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Health science pioneer challenges researchers to make social and scientific impact

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by Donna Richardson

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In our changing world, there is an almost infinite horizon of opportunity to positively impact the health of people globally. And, with these opportunities comes a moral responsibility for Canadians to commit their efforts towards the urgent demand for health services.

This is the view of Dr. John Evans, recipient of the 2007 Henry G. Friesen International Prize in Health Research, sponsored by Friends of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in conjunction with Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.

According to Evans, well known for his leadership contributions across the health sciences and to many national and international major health policy initiatives, there has been a transformation in health research in recent years.

"There has been a shift in the focus on biomedical and clinical research towards a broader view of research. It now includes studying how to promote and protect the health of populations and how to make health services more effective," he says.

The shift is evident in the creation of various funding bodies, including the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) by the Government of Canada in 2000. CIHR funds health research that improves Canadians' health, health care system and quality of life, and supports researchers and trainees in universities, teaching hospitals, and research institutes across Canada.

"There are so many different disciplines that have contributed to our understanding of health," says Evans. "The results of recent research have validated our assumptions that health can be affected by many factors that we hadn't paid attention to in the past."

To illustrate, Evans referred to research on various factors that can affect health, such as socioeconomic status, education, the physical environment, social support structures, gender, and healthy child development. "Public health is not an academic discipline," says Evans. "It is a set of strategies that draws on many disciplines."

When asked about the increasing demand for training for public health professionals – such as that provided by the U of A's School of Public Health – Evans emphasized the need for a strong interdisciplinary approach. "It requires the ability to draw on resources of an entire university. The greatest benefit will come by drawing on a changing mix of disciplines to address new challenges."



Dr. John Evans, 2007
Henry G. Friesen
International Prize in
Health Research

Evans points out that government has made significant investments in health research, yet this cannot be taken for granted. There is also an increased measure of accountability expected. "Researchers must demonstrate how effectively they are using their resources and consider innovative and collaborative partnerships in order to earn increased research funding," he states.

Health researchers have the opportunity to make an economic contribution through what he calls the commercialization of research. "Researchers can demonstrate return on investment by taking the results of research and bringing them to the market," says Evans. This may include job creation and improvements in health services.

Evans challenges researchers to demonstrate the economic impact of their work, but he also encourages them to ensure that there is a social impact as well.

"More than 90% of health research addresses the problems of industrialized countries, with little emphasis placed upon the concerns of developing countries," says Evans. "Successful interventions can only make a difference if they reach those who need them."

The Henry G. Friesen International Prize in Health Research is presented to an individual of international stature who exemplifies the vision, distinguished leadership, and innovative contributions of Dr. Henry G. Friesen and the broad impact he has made in health research and health research policy in Canada.

Dr. Evans will deliver a public lecture entitled [The Infinite Horizon of Health Research: Is Canada Visible?](#) on Monday, December 10th from 3:30 – 4:30 pm in the Timms Centre for the Arts. This event is co-hosted by the Office of the Vice-President (Research), the Health Sciences Council, and the School of Public Health with support from the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research.

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