LIVERight: Making liver health relevant for all Canadians

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Gary Fagan is President of the Canadian Liver Foundation (CLF) and a 20-year veteran of the not-for-profit arena. Before coming to the CLF, Mr Fagan worked for a number of years with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario. Under his leadership, the CLF has increased its investment in liver research to \$1.5 million annually, and has built strong education and support programs for high-risk groups, patients, health care professionals and the public. Mr Fagan believes in developing and building partnerships with the medical community, in addition to the various levels of government and corporate Canada, to help spread the message of the importance of liver health, as well as the risks and consequences of liver disease.

PA: What is the goal of the CLF?

GF: The mandate of the CLF is to promote liver health, and to reduce the incidence and impact of liver disease by supporting education and research into causes, diagnoses, prevention and treatment. To that end, we have recently launched a new awareness campaign called 'LIVERight', with the goals of having the liver recognized as a critical part of overall health, and having both the public and health care professionals recognize liver disease as a serious health issue worthy of their attention. Once liver disease is on their 'radar', we hope to see earlier identification and intervention, as well as greater support for this country's hepatologists and researchers in their efforts to find better treatments and, hopefully, cures.

PA: Can you describe the roles of the CLF in supporting liver research in Canada?

GF: We support liver research with financial resources and much more. By emphasizing the importance of liver health and the prevalence of liver disease, we highlight the need for liver research in tackling a health issue that affects more than one in 10 Canadians. We also celebrate the talents of this country's leading hepatologists while at the same time bringing attention to the fact that there is a drastic shortage of both clinicians and researchers in this field. In fact, we have sought out partnerships to help in recruiting new talent to address this shortfall. That said, a big part of our mandate is funding liver research, and each year, we invest more than one million dollars into our research grant program and special projects (Figure 1). We offer summer studentships, graduate studentships and operating grants to support researchers at various points in their careers. The CLF is also involved in special initiatives to help fund

training programs like the National Research Training Program in Hepatitis C, led by Dr Jenny Heathcote, and to support new diagnostic equipment in centres such as the

Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the McGill University Centre in Montreal, Quebec.

PA: What are the challenges of raising money for liver research?

GF: When the majority of people believe that liver disease is 'self-inflicted' and only affects those who drink or do drugs, it is difficult to get them to see liver research as a priority. In June 2006, we conducted an awareness study that showed that not only did the public make these assumptions, but health care professionals did too. These assumptions and stereotypes have stood in the way of people coming forward to support this cause. An added challenge is that we live in an instant gratification world, and donors are often looking for more immediate results from their investment. Unfortunately, liver research is a long and painstaking process so our challenge is to demonstrate the impact in the short term.

PA: Are we meeting the needs of Canadian liver researchers?

GF: Yes and no. The CLF is the second-largest funding source for liver research after the Canadian Institutes for Health Research. Over the past 39 years, we have probably supported virtually every liver researcher in Canada at one point or another in their career. But each year, we receive more and more grant applications. This year for instance, we received 41 applications for six available operating grants – that gives an idea of how the demand is far outpacing the supply. Unfortunately, we have heard stories of researchers leaving the country or leaving the field because doing liver research in Canada is not financially viable.

PA: Can you highlight some upcoming CLF initiatives?

GF: Our LIVERight campaign is an exciting new initiative that we hope will show Canadians the relevance of liver health in their daily lives. The campaign will involve television and print advertisements, as well as online components – all highlighting aspects of liver health. The television advertisement, for example, parodies a traditional beer commercial using unhealthy foods instead of alcohol to reveal the fact that both alcohol and a poor diet can harm the liver.

In the fall, we co-hosted our second Discover the World of Hepatology Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in conjunction

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Figure 1) The Canadian Liver Foundation's research investments (1999 to 2007)

with the University of Manitoba's Section of Hepatology (Winnipeg). This program was developed to build a new generation of liver specialists by encouraging medical residents from across the country to choose a career in hepatology. At the same time, we held a continuing medical education program for

primary care physicians in the province to provide them with the knowledge and tools to recognize, respond to and resolve liver health issues. Based on the participation levels and positive feedback, it is obvious that these programs are meeting a tremendous need for liver health education in Canada. We are grateful to the faculty and the sponsors for helping to make these programs a success, and we look forward to continuing them in 2008 and beyond.

PA: What can physicians do to help the CLF?

GF: Raising both awareness and funds in a very tough competitive environment requires a team approach involving professional staff, committed volunteers and the medical community. We need doctors to get involved – contact the CLF to see how you can help as a volunteer, speaker, medical expert and, last but not least, a donor. You can also talk to your patients to encourage them to seek out the CLF as both an information resource and volunteer opportunity. If doctors do not support the cause, it is much more difficult to convince the public to invest their time and money.

We feel that the CLF is entering a new era when liver health will become increasingly prominent in the lives of Canadians and in the minds of all health care professionals. We invite everyone to visit our website at <www.liver.ca> to see how you can get involved.