POSITION STATEMENT on behalf of 506 members of the RI-MUHC, MUHC, and McGill community on the nomination of Dr Constantine Stratakis as the next Executive Director of the RI-MUHC

On April 2, 2020, Science published an article titled Female scientists allege discrimination, neglect of research on women at NIH’s child health institute. The subject of the article is Dr. Constantine Stratakis, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development’s Director of Intramural Research. Dr. Stratakis has been appointed as the RI-MUHC’s new Executive Director (ED) and Chief Scientific Officer (CSO), effective June 1, 2020.

The purpose of this communication is to relay our request that the RI-MUHC Board of Directors revoke the hiring agreement of Dr. Constantine Stratakis as the RI-MUHC new ED and CSO.

What we know: Science is a prestigious, peer-reviewed scientific journal with an estimated readership of over half a million people and an impact factor of over 40. In addition to scientific research, it publishes science-related news. The author of the article is Dr. Meredith Wadman, a physician, Rhodes scholar, journalist, and Canadian. In her article, she reports that between 2013 and 2019, eight female professionals filed equal employment opportunity complaints naming Dr. Stratakis. Six complaints were sex discrimination allegations (some of which were combined with age discrimination allegations) and 2 complaints were related to age discrimination. Among these complaints:

- Three have been settled,
- One was dropped as a result of the complainant making the decision to leave her position,
- One was lost on appeal,
- One was dismissed, and
- Two are ongoing.

In her article, Dr. Wadman provides data indicating that during Dr. Stratakis’ tenure with NIH, fewer women than men have been hired and a higher proportion of women than men have left the child health institute. She provides details and citations from a wide range of female colleagues at multiple levels of the NIH supporting the allegation that Dr. Stratakis has not advocated for female scientists- instead he has blocked their advancement. In Dr. Wadman’s article, one female researcher observed, “Constantine Stratakis does not value the diversity, perspective, and contributions that women bring to the table as physicians and as scientists. That has shown in his actions, in how he has treated women here, and his poor record in enhancing the diversity of the institute.” Other researchers reported belittlement, disrespectful communication, condescension, and poor mentorship. One of the complainants alleged that “Stratakis went on a
‘tirade’...He ‘tried to belittle me, telling me that I had little potential.’” Another researcher reported: “I took a lower position to not be under [Stratakis’] authority”. Dr. Wadman also reported that there were complaints regarding ageism and age discrimination. The statement by employment lawyers in the article is also striking: “Employment lawyers say the collection of eight complaints against Stratakis is extraordinary. The number suggests an environment that is not welcoming or fair towards women because statistically speaking, there are going to be many other women who haven’t come forward and haven’t complained.’” This is corroborated in the article by statements from other researchers who had similar concerns but who did not file formal complaints.

What the job requires: We wish to highlight the critical elements being sought for the ED/CSO position at the RI-MUHC, taken directly from the job description/call for applications:

- The ED/CSO possesses a solid management experience;
- He/She promotes the attraction, retention and career development of research talent support staff;
- Creates a stimulating and safe workplace environment where innovation in health and life sciences research thrives;
- Cultivates the RI-MUHC talent base: oversees recruitment/retention plan and provides input on appointments and mentorships to assure optimal fit (suitability, sustainability and alignment with core partners);
- Promotes a healthy, safe, respectful and ethical workplace

We respectfully submit that it will not be possible for Dr. Stratakis to effectively meet the requirements of the posted job description, in view of the serious accusations that have come to light. The cloud of complaints and ongoing processes prohibits the formation of the relationships of trust required to fulfill the duties of RI-MUHC Executive Director.

The details provided, the prestige of the journal itself, and the experience of the author raise critical red flags about the suitability of Dr. Stratakis to be RI-MUHC Executive Director. The complaints and concerns regarding Dr. Stratakis are alarming and put into grave question Dr. Stratakis’ ability to meet the above elements being sought for the position of MUHC-RI ED/CSO, namely recruitment/retention, sustainability, career development and mentorship, and overall promotion of a safe, respectful, equitable and diverse work environment.

The rationale: Scientists and other members of the RI-MUHC community have to work with an RI-MUHC Director on day-to-day operations, strategic planning, and visioning. This requires trust. The Science article has raised many red flags that are too egregious to ignore and this may have irreparably damaged this trust. We are deeply concerned by the number, nature and timespan - eight complaints over a period of six years - of the NIH complaints against Dr. Stratakis specifically as they relate to issues of gender equity.
The RI-MUHC Director plays a significant role in setting the behavioural norms and shaping the culture of the RI-MUHC. Misogyny, sexism, and ageism have the potential to corrupt the millions of micro and macro decisions that face any organization. Scientists already face many uncertainties, including a perilous funding situation, and it is unfair to ask us to confront further uncertainty regarding the impartiality and objectivity of the director. The RI-MUHC wants to execute on our vision to “generate and leverage discovery and innovation to establish the MUHC as a world-class centre of excellence in patient-centred medicine.” A lack of trust in the RI-MUHC Director will significantly hinder the achievement of our objectives.

**Have we learned from our experience?** In 2004, the MUHC hired Dr. Arthur Porter as the Director General and Chief Executive Officer of the McGill University Health Centre. Dr. Porter was hired despite warnings to recruiters in 2003 by Dr. John Crissman, the former Dean of Medicine at Wayne State University School of Medicine about Porter’s “multiple (financial) outside interests.” A Detroit Free Press investigation at that time reported that these included a cancer clinic in the Bahamas, an auto parts company, a medical real estate company and several information technology firms. Decisions made and actions taken by Dr. Porter during his tenure with the MUHC caused significant damage to the reputation of our institution, which we have had to rebuild over the last number of years. We thank the RI-MUHC Board, the MUHC Board, and Dr. Gfeller for their important work in this regard. However, given the information that has come to light in the *Science* article, we believe that moving forward with the hiring of Dr. Stratakis has strong potential to damage a reputation that we have worked hard to rebuild.

The April 3, 2020 communiqué from Dr. Gfeller and M. Kruyt stated “we appreciate that the community is having strong reactions to the Science article, and we wish to reiterate that our ultimate objective is the success of the RI-MUHC. To that end, the Board of Directors of the RI-MUHC has scheduled a meeting next week to assess next steps” and that they welcome comments.

**Our strong and united position is that the RI-MUHC Board of Directors revoke the hiring agreement of Dr. Constantine Stratakis as the RI-MUHC new ED and CSO.**

**Conclusion:** The establishment of a relationship of trust among the RI-MUHC community, its Board, and its Director is crucial. In light of our own institutional history and the recent reports of the putative history of Dr. Stratakis, it would seem impossible to imagine that the necessary bonds of trust could ever be forged between the newly hired director and the scientific community. The director is also the “face” of the institution: the questions raised by the Science article undoubtedly will also erode the trust of our patients, our 1,200 graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, our donors and of all Quebec society.

We trust you, the RI-MUHC Board of Directors, to take the difficult but necessary actions that this important moment mandates.