**November 2, 2017:  A Conversation with Chief Science Advisor Dr. Mona Nemer**

**Making Canada a beacon for science literacy and evidence-based decision making**

Dr. Mona Nemer grew up during a time when women were generally discouraged from pursuing scientific or technical careers. When she learned that her all-girls school in Beirut, Lebanon didn’t offer a science curriculum, she successfully advocated for the high school to change its policy.

Now, as Canada’s second ever chief science advisor– and the first woman to hold the position – Dr. Nemer is championing efforts to make Canada a global beacon of scientific literacy and evidence-based decision making.

During recent meetings in Washington DC with officials at the National Academy of Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Science Foundation, Dr. Nemer said she was struck by how many people were looking to Canada for leadership at a time when “fake news” too often trumps scientific fact.

“The United States, like other countries that have reached out to us, our European friends and the European Commission as well, see Canada as being on the right path. Given the international context, we have an opportunity to lead and people also expect us to lead… We need to act on this,” Dr. Nemer told conference delegates.

At the same time, when it comes to science and science policy, she said there is much Canada can learn from other countries, including the United States which is still our closest scientific collaborator.

“This is an opportunity to signal to our friends and collaborators abroad that Canada is open to collaboration and working with you on issues that are important to everyone. No one country can tackle issues like the environment, microbial drug resistance or the Syrian refugee. We have to work together.”

While there has been much talk in political and policy circles in recent years about the importance of evidence-based (or “evidence-informed”) decision making, Dr. Nemer said equal attention must be given to how science is undertaken. This means asking the right questions, gathering the right data in support of those questions, and coming to a conclusion based on the weight of the evidence.

“If you want to have good policy, if you want to have a good future for the country, then that’s the only way to go. If you don’t go this way, then you are going to be putting out policies that are inadequate and can do harm,” said Dr. Nemer, the former VP Research at the University of Ottawa and a distinguished medical researcher specializing on the mechanisms of heart failure and congenital heart diseases.

Dr. Nemer said she’s encouraged by the federal government’s emphasis on science and evidence. On her first day in the new position, she said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told her, ‘I’ll take care of the politics. You take care of the science.’

Her office will provide the government with both technical and societal evidence that can be translated into various policy options. “There isn’t going to be one option … there would be options. These issues are not always black or white.”

She then reminded the audience of how independent her office will be when she said, “I get irritated when politicians alter the evidence in support of their decision making.”

The CSA’s job includes providing scientific advice to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, making recommendations to help ensure that government science is fully available and accessible to the public, and that federal scientists remain free to speak about their work.

“Another important part is that of convenor; engaging and really bringing together the intramural and extramural scientific community within Canada and also around world because science doesn’t stop at borders,” said Dr. Nemer “We don’t have walls on our borders but we have silos between us and that’s something we need to address.”

When it comes to intramural science, she said she plans in the near future to visit government labs, ADMs of science, chief scientists and individual scientists. “Intramural science is a big part of my mandate … I’m hoping it will be a close relationship and I’m here to help.”

At a time when the public’s mistrust of evidence and scientists is growing, a big priority for Dr. Nemer will be working with the larger scientific and policy communities to increase science literacy, including the public’s understanding of how science is done.

“We need to do it for the public. We need to do it for the country. It is essential for democracy that the public understand the content but also the methodology of science.”