

## Health research: getting the priorities right

*This policy brief outlines how, by setting national health research priorities, national research efforts can be systematically targeted at the major problems affecting local populations.*

**H**ealth research must be at the heart of any concerted efforts to reduce the huge, and widening, disparities in the health expectancies of developed and developing countries. Internationally, however, insufficient research is undertaken on the causes of these disparities; and for many developing countries, national research agendas have become skewed towards the priorities of the international research community. This research fails to provide local health professionals and policy-makers with the new knowledge they need to solve immediate problems and leaves many major diseases severely under-researched. Current policies aimed at directing health research to national needs are frequently lacking or inadequate. Decision-makers can address this policy gap by helping to identify and implement national health research priorities. Tools and expertise are available to aid this process. This can help to ensure that national research efforts target national research needs.

### Health research is essential to improve health

Health research is essential to inform health policy, improve health care and increase population health. In a world where the gaps in health between the richest and the poorest are widening, health research can help break the cycle of ill health and poverty that are the major factors holding back progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>1</sup> Current knowledge, practices and policies have so far failed to do this.

“Research is essential in every country, no matter how poor, to guide domestic and foreign investments and to ensure that it’s unsolved health problems receive attention on the international agenda of research collaboration.”<sup>2</sup>

### Internationally, little research is conducted on the health problems of developing countries

The disparities between global health research priorities and the national health research needs of developing countries have been well documented. The terms ‘10-90 gap’ and ‘neglected diseases’ have, unfortunately, become common currency. Even where international health research is directed towards the health problems of the developing world this research is often of little direct relevance to these countries.<sup>3</sup>

Although, the pharmaceutical industry contributes 42% of global funds for health research, the health problems of developing countries rarely provide the potential profit incentive to attract their attention.<sup>4</sup> Often when these conditions are targeted this research addresses the aspects of the disease that

affect developed countries (e.g. malaria prophylaxis for travellers).<sup>5</sup> Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) can play an important role in financing research to address this gap in drug and vaccine development. However, PPPs address just a few conditions and target long-term solutions of a global scope (e.g. HIV vaccine). They rarely provide answers to the immediate problems facing health professionals and policy-makers in developing countries.

Due to demographic changes health policy-makers in developing countries must also contend with problems long considered as developed country diseases (e.g. diabetes and cardiovascular disease).<sup>6</sup> Many effective treatments for these conditions, widely available in developed countries, are simply too costly for developing countries to afford.

### Nationally, research efforts can become skewed towards international priorities

The situation is made worse by the influence that international health research funders have on the research conducted across large parts of the world. Developing countries provide 65% of the investments in research that address the health problems from which they suffer.<sup>7</sup> However, these funds are often tied up in supporting national research infrastructures. Many countries rely on international sources to fund research projects. This can skew the research conducted, away from national needs, towards international or commercial interests.

## National health research priority setting exercises can identify where research efforts can be best targeted

To address this problem, policy-makers must lead efforts to identify research needs and establish the priorities for their national health research systems. Established low-cost tools are available to do this. These systematically identify:

- ◆ **The major national health and health policy problems.** These may be health conditions, risk factors or crosscutting issues such as the delivery of services.
- ◆ **The key research questions.** Potential solutions may lie outside traditional medical science, for example in policy analysis, operations research, basic science, social science, or engineering.
- ◆ **The projects most likely to provide the greatest benefits.** Given the current knowledge in the field, an assessment of the likely success of different avenues of research will be required.
- ◆ **The capacities required to conduct the research and utilise the findings.** National capacity to conduct the prioritised research will have to be assessed, and strengthened where necessary. Capacity to act on the findings and use them to formulate new procedures or policies is an essential part of this process.

This systematic approach can also provide a framework to direct research towards addressing the needs of particularly disadvantaged groups, to ensure that health research works for everyone.

## Leadership is required to ensure that priority research agendas are implemented

Policy-makers will have to provide leadership to bring on board all the key stakeholders required to carry the research agenda forward. Of particular importance will be national and international research funders. The development of funding strategies, which make best use of national resources and the opportunities provided by international sources, can help this process and ensure that all parties get value for money. A strong commitment to the national priority agenda can provide a firm foundation for negotiations with donor agencies and

ensure more equitable partnerships. Negotiations can hammer home the message that national research should tackle national problems. If the MDGs are to be realised through partnerships, these partnerships cannot built on dependency.

## Health research can save lives

To help reduce ill health and increase life expectancy in developing countries national research efforts must tackle the right problems. Along with a series of other simple tools, priority setting exercises can be integrated into the systematic development of national health research systems to direct research towards providing the new knowledge necessary to do this. Without the introduction of such rational approaches, the current ad hoc system will continue to waste scarce funds and valuable opportunities. Support is available, from COHRED and others, to help countries develop the capacities and policies required to implement this process. National health research that addresses national problems can form the foundations from which all development efforts can follow.

## References

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