

Editorial

Combating disease and promoting health: challenges for health research

S.A. Matlin¹

Health challenges at global, regional and national levels are constantly changing with time, due to the impact of many different factors. Considerable progress was made in the 20th century in combating infectious diseases with the development of drugs for the treatment of bacterial infections and a wide range of metabolic disorders as well as vaccines to prevent some bacterial and viral infections. Achievements included the eradication of smallpox and progress towards eradication of polio. However, major challenges now arise from new, emerging and re-emerging infectious agents. In parallel, the epidemiological transition towards noncommunicable diseases that was perceived as a characteristic of affluence is now being seen in many low- and middle-income countries, presenting a new range of challenges for prevention, diagnosis and treatment of these chronic conditions. Additional factors that are stretching the capacities of all countries, but especially those at the lower end of the income scale, include the rising tide of injuries, impacts of globalization on health and the recognition that social, economic and political determinants of health are also important and that many factors outside the health sector or system impact on the health of populations. Specific targets, whether for improvements in

efficiency or cost-effectiveness or for the achievement of international goals such as the Millennium Development Goals, are also stretching the capacities of planners, managers and service deliverers—often in situations where factors such as HIV/AIDS or migration are depleting an already under-strength health workforce.

There are no simple solutions, no “magic bullets”, to help confront these challenges. It is clear, however, that health research has many vital and indispensable roles to play. The research needed covers a very broad spectrum, encompassing studies in basic and biomedical sciences to help understand the biological basis of disease states and identify effective treatments and the implementation of research to ensure the effective deployment of interventions. It includes health policy and systems research to enable the use of proven and effective interventions by policy-makers, managers and deliverers of services; social sciences and behavioural research; and operational research.

Overall, this wide spectrum of essential health research, spanning the creation of global public goods such as new knowledge, processes and tools, the adaptation of these goods to local settings, the monitoring and evaluation of their effective deployment and of the health status of the population,

¹Executive Director, Global Forum for Health Research, Geneva, Switzerland (Correspondence to: stephen.matlin@globalforumhealth.org).

requires the existence and utilization of appropriate research capacity at global and local levels. In an increasingly globalized health environment, how is responsibility for financing the necessary health research to be shared among the global and local actors? Who sets the priorities in each arena, who does the work, and who uses the results?

These questions are central to meeting the current challenges faced in combating disease and promoting health. They are at the core of Forum 10, the annual meeting of the Global Forum for Health Research being held in Cairo from 29 October to 2 November 2006. Like these challenges, Forum 10 blends a range of perspectives from the global to the local, bringing together policy-makers, funders, development partners, research leaders, community representatives and the media from around the world but also focusing in particular on the Eastern Mediterranean Region and the host country.

The overall objective of the Global Forum for Health Research, which began formal operations in 1998, is to help focus research efforts on the health problems of the poor through an improvement in the allocation of research funds, support of better priority setting processes and methodologies, promotion of relevant research, support for concerted efforts in health research and dissemination of the research findings. In a current collaboration with the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean of World Health Organization (WHO-EMRO), the Global Forum is examining how research results can be better aligned with the information and evidence needs of policy-makers.

The Global Forum for Health Research particularly welcomes this Special Issue of the *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, which provide a wide range of perspectives in a series of papers that reflect the spectrum of health research interests across the Region.

Forum 11

The 11th meeting of the Global Forum for Health Research will take place in China from 29 October to 2 November 2007, with the theme: "Equitable access: research challenges for health in developing countries".

For more information contact the Global Forum for Health Research:
<http://www.globalforumhealth.org>.