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**REPORT ON PROGRESS OF  
WHO-SPONSORED RESEARCH ACTIVITIES IN  
THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report on the progress of WHO-sponsored research activities in the Region covering the period 1 July 1985 to 30 June 1987 is presented in accordance with resolution EM/RC32/R.6 of the Thirty-second Session of the Regional Committee of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, October 1985.

The general policy of the Regional Office for the promotion of health research during this period placed emphasis on health systems research as a tool to facilitate reaching the goal of Health for All by the Year 2000.

## 2. EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON HEALTH RESEARCH

The Committee on Health Research, which some of the outstanding research workers and health administrators of the Region are serving as members, met twice under the chairmanship of Dr A.S. Al Majali, President, University of Jordan.

At its Eleventh Session, held in Kuwait in April 1986, the Committee reviewed the report of a team on the impact of WHO-sponsored research activities in the Region since the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Medical Research (as it was formerly called) in 1976. It also reviewed the progress of research activities in several programme areas including diarrhoeal diseases, and the Special Programme for Research, Development, and Research Training in Human Reproduction. Also, Regional research strategies were discussed in the context of approved global strategies.

At its Twelfth Session, held in Lahore, Pakistan, in April 1987, the Committee discussed the report of the Task Force for the implementation of the Regional research strategy at the national level and also reviewed the progress of research activities on diarrhoeal diseases and the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases.

At both sessions, the Committee recommended that the Regional Office continue to organize workshops and training courses for potential researchers and research managers and to support national meetings for senior health services managers, academicians, research workers, and other interested parties, in order to enhance coordination and to reach a common understanding on health systems research.

## 3. IMPLEMENTATION OF REGIONAL HEALTH RESEARCH STRATEGY

The main activity in this respect was the formation of the Task Force for the development of a rational policy and strategy for research in support of national health development. The Task Force visited Kuwait in September 1986 and Pakistan in January 1987. In both countries, its members met top-level health administrators and also those involved in carrying out health research. The Task Force's reports were reviewed by the Regional Advisory Committee for Health Research and its recommendations were forwarded to the governments concerned. These will be followed up, until plans of work at national level are prepared and implemented.

In the same line of activities, short-term consultants and staff members visited Democratic Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen to strengthen research capabilities of these countries and, in some cases, to help in the

preparation of a plan of work for promotion of research in the country concerned.

#### 4. REGIONAL AND NATIONAL COORDINATION OF HEALTH RESEARCH

For the purpose of Regional and national coordination of health research, a meeting of the national officers responsible for health research is held once every two years in one of the countries of the Region.

The third of such meetings was held in Khartoum, Sudan, in November 1986; representatives from nine countries participated. Country reports presented at the meeting showed that political commitment to support health research has considerably increased and that some sort of structure for coordination of research exists in most reporting countries. However, there are still substantial obstacles impeding promotion and coordination of health research, such as scarcity of competent research manpower and of mid-level research workers, cumbersome administrative procedures in financing research projects and difficulty in coordination of efforts of various institutions, as well as poor quality and poor presentation of research proposals.

Among other subjects discussed at this meeting was the role of national health research councils or analogous bodies in implementation of the Regional health research strategy, promotion of health systems research, coordination of the efforts of various institutions and intersectoral collaboration.

#### 5. REGIONAL RESEARCH GRANTS AND RESEARCH TRAINING AWARDS

In the period covered by this report, twelve research proposals have been supported by the Regional Office. These do not include research proposals related to the Special Programme of Research and Training in Tropical Diseases or the Special Programme on Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction, which will be reported on later. Neither do they include research proposals in the area of diarrhoeal diseases supported by the WHO Diarrhoeal Diseases Control Programme. Unfortunately, the capacity of most countries for designing and implementing research projects in the areas of health systems research and behavioural research (the priority areas of the Region) is still limited and the number of applications received which could be approved and funded is still small.

Five research training grants have been awarded during this period. Although the Regional Office receives many requests for research training grants, few of them meet the criteria for WHO grants. Most are requests for postgraduate students originally from countries of this Region wishing to continue their studies with the support of WHO.

#### 6. WHO COLLABORATING CENTRES

Since WHO does not possess its own laboratories, it has been its practice to work through the WHO collaborating centres in the conduct of priority research, training and reference work. The performance of these centres tends to change as time passes, and is sometimes affected by various types of upheaval, including staff turnover. Also, once designated, a WHO collaborating centre tends to become sensitive to possible withdrawal of this

prestigious designation. During the last two years, a careful study of the situation in the Region showed that many of the collaborating centres were not active; some were even barely in existence and their designation was therefore terminated.

This subject also was discussed at the Eleventh Session of the Advisory Committee which proposed some additional criteria to those given in the WHO Manual for designation of a WHO collaborating centre. At present, there are twenty-five in the Region while the designation of a few others is under way.

#### 7. WORKSHOPS ON RESEARCH MANAGEMENT AND ON HEALTH SYSTEMS RESEARCH

A training workshop on research management was held in Khartoum, Sudan, in August 1985. Three workshops on health systems research were held, one in Kuwait in September 1986 as part of the activity of the Task Force for implementation of Regional research strategies, the second in Sana'a, Yemen, in February 1987 and the third in Baghdad, Iraq, in March 1987. It is expected that, as the outcome of these training programmes, decision-makers and research workers will have become more sensitized to the importance and place of health systems research and that this will lead to well-formulated national plans for such research in these countries, linked to national health plans.

#### 8. DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING MATERIALS FOR HEALTH SYSTEMS RESEARCH WORKSHOPS

To ensure the success of training workshops on health systems research, it was felt that there is a need for training modules and case studies. Although such materials have been prepared for similar workshops in WHO's African and European Regions and elsewhere, it was felt that, for use in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, they should be prepared taking into account the social and cultural situations prevailing there. To meet these needs, five training modules have been prepared, field-tested and revised; they are being used both within and outside this Region for workshops on health systems research. Also, in addition to the case studies prepared so far, a manual containing at least twenty completely detailed case studies, each one accompanied by a guide for the trainer, is under preparation; the first draft will become available by the end of 1987.

#### 9. SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING IN TROPICAL DISEASES

From its inception ten years ago up to 31 December 1986, the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases has supported a total of 2917 projects in 106 Member States of WHO. More than 4500 scientists from 129 Member States have participated in the operation, management and evaluation of the Programme. In total, US\$157 million have been spent world-wide in direct support to scientists and institutions. The proportion of project funds devoted directly to developing countries where the six tropical diseases concerned are endemic rose from 29% in 1977 to an average of 56% between 1982 and 1986.

The results of the research and development activities sponsored by this Programme are evident now, not only in the form of publications (about 5000 to date) but in the more tangible form of products, about sixty of which have reached the stage of clinical testing or are being incorporated into national disease control programmes. During this period the research capability

strengthening component of the Programme has provided ninety-five institutional grants and about 650 research training grants of varying duration to institutions and scientists respectively in developing countries. Efforts are now under way within the Programme to integrate the activities being supported by its two components so that institutions and scientists in endemic developing countries become increasingly involved in the Programme's research and development efforts.

During the period covered by this report, twenty-four projects in the Region received financial support from the Special Programme for training, institution-strengthening and research proposals. The Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Health Research continually expresses its concern about the scant participation of scientists in the Region in activities related to tropical diseases research. During 1986, officials of the Special Programme carried out some site visits - in Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Somalia and Sudan - to promote its activities in the Region. Similar visits to other Regional countries are envisaged for the near future.

#### 10. SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH TRAINING IN HUMAN REPRODUCTION

The Special Programme for Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction was established in 1972 as the main instrument within WHO for the promotion, coordination and support of international research and development of technology relating to human reproduction and family planning.

The structure of this Special Programme has recently been reorganized. Activities related to its goal of the strengthening of research institutions in developing countries are now managed by a Committee on Resources for Research; this provides training grants for training of researchers in developing countries and institutional grants to enable institutions to acquire equipment, supplies and other resources needed for the performance of research relevant to human reproduction. Since its inception, the Special Programme has provided about 1000 training grants and supported the development of about thirty institutions, some of which are now playing important regional roles. The three centres in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, located at Alexandria (Egypt), Karachi (Pakistan) and Tunis, now have a strong enough research capacity to initiate and carry out research of relevance to national family planning programmes. In the period covered by this report, institutions in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have benefited from more than thirty research projects, training grants and institutional support.

The research and development activities of this Special Programme are managed by nine task forces.

#### 11. DIARRHOEAL DISEASES

Research on diarrhoeal diseases is guided and monitored by the Regional Scientific Working Group on Diarrhoeal Diseases which meets for two days immediately prior to the annual meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Health Research. The results of the discussion of this Group are then presented to the meeting of the Committee for review and recommendations.

Since the inception of the Diarrhoeal Diseases Control Programme, thirty-one research proposals have been supported in this Region; the majority of them has been completed. Many of the results of this research have been used in resolving national problems in the field of diarrhoeal disease control.

At present, only those research proposals that have operational aspects are considered by the Regional Scientific Working Group; those with basic biomedical components are referred for the consideration of the Global Scientific Working Group.

A considerable number of investigators and their collaborators in the Region currently comprise a body from which skilful researchers can be drawn; this should be used to carry out studies aimed at further promotion of research in the field of diarrhoeal disease control.

## 12. PUBLICATION OF THE REGIONAL JOURNAL

In order to meet the needs of the Region in health research in general, and health systems research in particular, it was decided that a new Journal, entitled "Eastern Mediterranean Region Health Services Journal" be published. The contents of this Journal include areas covered by two previous publications, i.e. "The Learner" and "Health Services Researcher". The aim of this Journal is to facilitate publication of the results of studies in the areas of health systems research, behavioural research and health manpower development in the Region. The Journal will be published twice a year. The first issue came out in September 1986 and the second in March 1987.