

Summary report on the

Meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Health Research

WHO-EM/RPC/050/E

Cairo, Egypt
17–18 February 2020



World Health
Organization

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

Under the title of Supporting research for health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region of the World Health Organization (WHO), the first meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Health Research (ACHR) was held in the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo, Egypt, from 17 to 18 February 2020.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- share and discuss the Committee's terms of reference;
- review research for health plans and activities;
- discuss best methods for supporting health research systems and institutions in the Region;
- review current mechanisms for health research governance;
- deliberate on effective modalities of knowledge/research-evidence translation, dissemination and utilization for health policy-making in the Region.

The opening address by Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, emphasized the role of health research in meeting the goals of WHO. The Regional Director noted that the four pillars of *The WHO strategy on research for health* are priorities, capacities, standards and translation, and emphasized the need for WHO to improve the health research agenda for Member States of the Region. Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director, Programme Management, focused on the governing role of WHO and the essential function research has in its mandate, while Dr Arash Rashidian, Director, Science, Information and Dissemination, emphasized the importance of the ACHR in guiding and supporting efforts to strengthen research for health in the Region. Dr Iman Nuwayhid (Lebanon) was selected as the ACHR Chairperson, while Dr Hyam Bashour (Syrian Arab Republic) was selected as the meeting Rapporteur.

The agenda included four sessions, divided by the four pillars of *The WHO strategy on research for health*, with 13 presentations and two working groups. Participants included ACHR members and resource persons from the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond.

2. Summary of discussions

An introductory presentation was delivered on the recently formulated WHO Science Division, its vision and organogram including: foresight and emerging technologies; research prioritization; health ethics and governance; research policy and access; and knowledge and evidence to impact. This was followed by a presentation on Research for health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including the outcomes of different WHO regional surveys. The role of academic institutions in supporting health research was then emphasized, citing the experience of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. Reflections on the activities of the Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), United States of America, as well as the NIH database for funded projects (www.worldreport.nih.gov) were shared.

The challenges to institutionalizing health systems research in the Eastern Mediterranean Region at the conceptualization, operationalization and implementation levels were discussed. Priorities and challenges of research during emergencies were presented, emphasizing that research is vital to guide humanitarian emergency response and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. A historical perspective on the role of the ACHR was presented, indicating that its role was either reactive (providing expert advice to ongoing WHO activities) or proactive (flagging important concurrent health-related issues to be pursued by WHO). This was followed by a presentation on the importance of priority-setting for health research, as well as types and methods of prioritization and their complexities.

The functions and modus operandi of the Eastern Mediterranean Research Ethics Review Committee were presented and discussed. This was followed by emphasis on the role of large cohort studies in research for health in the Region, with special reference to the Golestan Cohort Study in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition, two presentations covered the theme of knowledge translation, transfer and dissemination, with emphasis on the Framework for action to improve national institutional capacity for the use of evidence in health policy-making in the Eastern Mediterranean Region 2020–2024, endorsed by the Regional Committee in October 2019. The process of developing evidence-based clinical guidelines was described, linking guidance development to policy-making and impact.

Working groups

Participants were divided into three working groups to discuss capacity-building and prioritization for research in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, guided by the following questions:

- What are considered national priorities for capacity-building?
- What are best modalities to build national capacities?
- Do countries have to have national research priorities?
- Should they be linked to national health/public health priorities?
- If yes, what would be the recommended methodology for national/institutional prioritization?

The three working groups then discussed research oversight and translation for research for health in the Region, guided by the following questions:

- What are the basic prerequisites for oversight activities?
- Do countries have to have national research ethics committees?
- If yes, what would be the basic practical membership composition?

- At which stage of the evidence cycle should health policy-makers be involved?
- What are best methods for institutionalization of use of evidence (especially research-generated evidence) for health policy-making?
- What would be the best modalities for capacity-building in knowledge translation?

Outcome of discussions

The key discussions points that followed the sessions and working groups are summarized below.

ACHR terms of reference

The following terms of reference of the Eastern Mediterranean ACHR were shared and discussed.

- Recommending regional health research and development policies, in line with the four strategic priorities outlined in Vision 2023.
- Promoting research as a key tool for health development and as a means for formulating evidence-based policies and actions for change.
- Supporting the development of effective health research systems and strengthening of research capacities in countries of the Region.
- Promoting the use of ethical criteria in conducting and reporting research in the Region.

During discussions, participants noted that the ACHR's advisory role is relevant for all departments/units of the Regional Office and especially the Regional Director, as the research component is cross-cutting across disciplines/areas of work. It was observed that the ways in which ACHR

members can assist the Regional Office in between meetings needs to be clarified. Participants suggested that the Committee could have both a reactive and proactive role; furthermore, it could serve as an enabler, advocate and facilitator.

Research for health in the Region

With regards to the current situation of health research in the Region, WHO's work on input-output analysis was commended; however, further in-depth analysis of research output is needed, using better research metrics including citation, equity and social determinants, as well as analysis of grey literature, to provide a clearer diagnosis of health research gaps in the Region. It was noted that research priorities should be defined at the national, and even subnational, level. The need to create inventories and accessible databases for research outputs was also highlighted.

Participants discussed the many challenges that face health research in the Region, including:

- limited funding to institutions conducting health research;
- limited awareness of policy-makers on the importance of research;
- lack of national policies and regulations that govern the conduct of health research;
- limited availability of and access to data;
- maldistribution or inadequacy of trained health researchers;
- effect of economic sanctions in some countries and the further isolation of researchers and their limited access to data.

Strengthening health research systems (capacity)

To strengthen health research systems, participants emphasized that building institutional capacity should be at the forefront of efforts due

to its great potential. National health research systems with supportive policies need to be created. WHO should support and facilitate national and regional networks of institutions, which could play a major role in advancing research. The use of WHO collaborating centres, research hubs and other resources is vital and an inventory of these entities should be created and made available to Member States. Leaving no one behind and addressing the diverse needs of the different groups of countries in the Region was also highlighted as important in strengthening health research systems.

Meeting health needs (priorities)

Prioritization is an exercise of great importance but also of complexity, and thus the methodology applied should be properly selected and appropriate for the purpose. Prioritization of health needs is firstly essential, upon which the priorities for health research can be identified. Research institutions should be encouraged to set their research priorities to fit the national priorities. There is potential for prioritizing of two or three health problems (based on the epidemiology and size of the problem) and focusing all research-related activities around these, for example, tobacco use, leishmaniasis (a neglected problem in the Region), noncommunicable diseases (cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, diabetes) and migration. The prioritization exercises carried out by different departments of the Regional Office are valuable, and use sound methodology to yield relevant and answerable questions. The Regional Office, and the huge data that it collects from Member States, is also very valuable to the diagnosis of research gaps.

Research governance and good research practice (standards)

Ethics are fundamental to quality research. Participants commended the Regional Office for its work on ethical standards. Engagement of the

Eastern Mediterranean Research Ethics Review Committee in the ethics of health care, as well as in ethics of research, is encouraged. WHO should continue its strategic collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with regards to research ethics. Research oversight is crucial and thus guidance from WHO to institutions is necessary in this area. Educating the public and lay persons also is important to improve the implementation of ethical standards, mainly in relation to informed consent. There should be coordination of global, regional and national guidelines for governing the ethics of activities involving human subjects. Cohort studies are extremely useful designs and their potential is clear; however, there are challenges in conducting cohort studies and ample room for other study designs, such as case-control and even cross-sectional studies. The potential for collaboration was also recognized, having learnt about the experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran in undertaking a large cohort study.

Evidence to policy and practice (translation)

The Committee agreed that evidence to policy is the first priority for health research that the Regional Office should address. Re-emphasis on the implementation of resolution EM/RC66/R.5 and commitment to the regional framework for action would be important enablers of further work. Building institutional capacity in evidence-informed policy-making is essential and thus participants suggested that a programme of work should commence, whereby assessment of the capacity of institutions (both academic and non-academic) is conducted. Analysis of “evidence ecosystems” for health is important, and issues around conflicts of interest and lobbying were also discussed.

3. Conclusion

Based on the discussions, priority actions were agreed by the ACHR for supporting health research in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

4. Way forward

Member States

- Acknowledge the challenges that face research production and the use of generated evidence for health policy-making.
- Identify the best methods and resources to tackle and overcome the identified challenges.

WHO

- Energize the regional agenda for research for health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.
- Expand bibliometric analysis to include grey literature and other research outputs in the Region.
- Build an inventory or accessible database of research outputs, after mapping research in the Region.
- Advocate for institutional capacity-building both at ministries of health and research/academic institutions.
- Document and share successful international collaborations.
- Foster regional prioritization exercises and share outcomes for potential use.
- Support research work on priority problems (selected risk factors/outcomes) to focus all health research-related activities.
- Support research oversight activities by providing/disseminating related guidance.
- Play a more proactive role in evidence-informed policy-making and support relevant institutional capacity.

- Support the development of national clinical practice guidelines.
- Assess and analyse the impact of WHO-supported research in the Region.



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