
Global Health Research – Introduction

Research on global health issues has during recent years received increased attention by Norwegian institutions. Norwegian epidemiologists are gradually becoming more involved in research on poverty related diseases in collaboration with counterparts in low income countries.

The contributions to this special issue of the *Norwegian Journal of Epidemiology* cover some of the issues dealt with by Norwegian researchers in this field. The first two articles (1,2) discuss the importance of epidemiologic research for improving global health and health care. Focus should be on intervention studies on health system factors and poverty related diseases (1). An important priority is research on diseases affecting child health and nutrition and the HIV infection. These diseases together account for nearly 50% of the disability adjusted life years (DALYs) lost in Africa. Daily, nearly 30,000 children under the age of 5 die, mostly from preventable causes, and 8,000 people die from HIV infection (1). Heggenhougen underlines the need of addressing also the broader societal factors like the causes and consequences of inequity in health and health care between and within countries (2).

In a paper on the future global development of the tuberculosis epidemic (3), Bjune discusses the possible changes that may have occurred in the tuberculosis epidemic and challenges related to increased drug resistance and infectivity of the new mycobacterium tuberculosis strain of the Beijing family. A review paper on the tragic high levels of maternal mortality in many low-income countries (4) points to an important role of epidemiologic research for contributing to improved implementation of effective programs also in a situation where effective measures for prevention are well known. Zinc as a new and effective treatment for childhood infections is the topic of one article (5). Other papers discuss the value of free-of-charge testing in the effort to prevent the spread of the HIV infection (6), and the impact of being HIV-positive on self-rated health in a high prevalence area (7). Oral health problems have an impact on quality of life in many low-resource settings, and the prevalence and consequences of dental pain are discussed (8). Economic evaluations and cost effectiveness studies of health interventions are increasingly used as basis for priority setting, and Robberstad discusses the differences between the use of quality adjusted life years

(QALYs) and DALYs as measures of outcomes in this context (9).

We hope that the issue will contribute to an increased attention on studies addressing health problems of major public health importance for disadvantaged populations, as is called for in three of the papers (1,2,4). Possibilities for funding of such research have gradually improved. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs contributes through the Norwegian Cooperation Programme for Development, Research and Higher Education (NUFU). NUFU is preparing a new call for proposals for the period 2007-2011 with submission deadline June 1, 2006 (10). NUFU provides support to projects and research activities in the South, and does not fund scholarships to Norwegian researchers.

Currently, only about 5% of the total funds for health research in Norway go to research on conditions that account for 90% of the global disease burden, a lower fraction than in most other industrialized countries. There is political support to reduce this so called "5/90-gap" and for improved funding for Norwegian scientists in this field. Thus, in 2005 the Research Council of Norway established a program for global health research (11) that gives opportunities for support to epidemiologic projects.

The program will support research aiming to improve health and health care for marginalised populations in low- and middle income countries focusing on

- Development and evaluation of new methods for prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care
- More efficient and equitable use of existing methods for prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care
- Improved equity in health through research on interventions that address structural and individual determinants of poor health
- Improved quality, equity, accessibility and affordability of health care through health policy and systems research

A newly established Norwegian Forum for Global Health Research will serve as a meeting place for researchers and policy makers and as a forum for advocacy for increased Norwegian involvement in global health research. We encourage Norwegian epidemiologists to direct their attention to studies in low income countries for addressing major global health issues that are very challenging from a scientific as well as from a societal and ethical perspective.

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