Making research matter

The tangible value of research is in the application of discoveries to alleviate human suffering and to enhance our lives and well-being. Scientific institutions and training are adept at identifying and exploring the frontiers of knowledge, producing a wealth of information about basic, clinical, and social sciences. The scientific enterprise is less effective when it comes to the critical step of translating research findings into practical use. As a result, the task of understanding how new knowledge can best be applied proceeds slowly. The reciprocal task of identifying practical problems that could benefit from scientific investigation can be even slower. The result is an often lengthy delay between discovery and implementation: significant advances in medical knowledge may take over a decade to be disseminated and adopted [1].

These shortcomings, evident in the United States, are even more apparent and costly when considered from an international perspective. Developing countries often face the greatest health problems, yet in these countries, scientific resources— institutions and expertise—are often severely constrained. Consequently, the full potential power of science at the international level is largely untapped.

From an international perspective, the scientific enterprise is both a success story and a critical opportunity. A decade of investment in pilot programs that have paired developing country researchers with colleagues and resources in the United States and Europe has started to pay dividends. These “twinning” programs, funded by foundations and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have nurtured a new generation of promising researchers in many developing countries. Despite overwhelming economic and infrastructure obstacles, developing country researchers are finding ways not only to continue their research efforts, but to send research reports for publication. Submissions to Contraception and ARHP’s clinical conference by scientists in the developing world have reached record numbers and are increasing rapidly each year.

These accomplishments demonstrate that success is possible. Nevertheless, a critical opportunity remains. Current programs to enhance research partnerships are modest in scale, with intermittent and uncertain funding. Efforts needs to be expanded so that many leading research centers in developed countries studying family planning, contraceptive development, sexually transmitted infections, and abortion are able to form effective and enduring international partnerships. Reproductive health issues can have an enormous impact on the health of populations in the developing world, where high rates of reproductive illness and maternal mortality coexist with minimal access to reproductive health and family planning care. Even more so than in the developed world, improving reproductive health care in developing countries—where the world’s largest populations of young people most likely to need such care live now—can make a big difference.

To be most effective, cross-national efforts must provide a sustained commitment to bi-directional exchange. Research projects can contribute to the development of local resources, including institutions and individual researchers. The identification of research topics, formulation of appropriate research strategies, and task of translating scientific knowledge into meaningful applications can be conducted collaboratively. This strategy will bring new vitality and relevance to the research process for both ends of the collaboration, and will help ensure that research investments are used effectively, translating science into practice.

In the field of reproductive health and family planning, an international vision seems certain to be the way of the future. And as reproductive health professionals, our version of “think globally, act locally” can include watching for and taking advantage of every opportunity we find to develop international collaborations and to support funding and research for such efforts. When prioritizing among possible new research directions, the health needs of the whole world deserve to be considered. Our top priorities ought to be research that matters, not only for local advances but for the greatest international benefit.

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