

# **EDITORIAL**

## **ADVANCING THE FRONTIERS OF HEALTH RESEARCH IN NIGERIA**

Health research, otherwise known as medical research, is the systematic generation of knowledge for the promotion and restoration of health as well as the prevention and treatment of disease. Its broad divisions include clinical research, biomedical research, epidemiological research, health systems research and research into socio-cultural, environmental and behavioural health. For years, Africa and the global community have made efforts towards closing the so-called '10/90 gap'; a term which illustrates the imbalance that exists between the developed and developing countries, in research funding, research output and focus.

With the ever-increasing need to design and implement evidence-based policies, treatments and programmes, it has become necessary that health research is context-specific and based on prevailing health needs so that the results can be effectively applied to the reference populations to bring about the desired positive change in health status. Unfortunately, Nigeria and many other developing countries have continued to rely on the transfer of knowledge and technology from developed nations. Reasons abound for this, including poor funding, low national priority for research and poor political will to support research, failure of researchers to key into national health research priorities, inadequate resources and weak technical capacity to conduct high-quality health research in response to national health issues and failure to translate research results into action. Over the past two decades, there have been renewed efforts by the global community to address this disparity through the creation of initiatives in key areas of health research as well as in health priority setting; with positive results reported. However, for Nigeria to fast-track her progress and be on track to meet the targets of the health-related Sustainable Development Goals, collaborative efforts by all stakeholders need to be applied.

It is imperative for the government, policymakers and indeed private investors in the health sector to realise that investment in health research is one that produces abundant economic benefits. Even when the rewards are not monetary, it can reduce wastage of limited resources through informed and rational health decision making. Consequently, there is a need to show more support, particularly for research aimed at producing the greatest health impact for investment. While donor support for health research is laudable, it is not without its limitations. In addition to issues with sustainability, there are concerns that such research is likely to be driven by the agenda of the donors, rather than the country's needs. It becomes essential; therefore, for Nigeria and other developing countries to commit more funds to research.

Equally, increasing support for outstanding individuals and groups in the different fields of health research will enable them serve as foci around which research activities can be undertaken and young researchers groomed; as well as improve the country's scientific reputation in the developed world. Furthermore, it is essential to create the capacity for research in the national and regional research institutes/centres. This can be achieved through the provision and maintenance of standard, functional research infrastructure and equipment, the appointment of capable researchers to head these research centres, including ensuring stable service conditions, adequate remuneration and providing small start-up grants for young trainee researchers. Creating opportunities for researchers to discuss areas of collaboration, exchange ideas with their counterparts worldwide and observe new developments through sponsorship to conferences, meetings, fellowships, as well

as supporting institutional online access to medical information will enable Nigerian health researchers build their knowledge networks and improve research quality and output. Such collaborations are also great ways to tackle ethical issues that may arise when researchers in the developed countries undertake research in developing countries. In the same vein, it is also essential that quality research carried out by developing country scientists are brought to the limelight through dissemination in international publishing networks. The African Journal Partnership Project is a great initiative in this regard.

Researchers on their part have the responsibility to garner government support for their work by aiming to address research questions that will lead to the generation of evidence for health decision making. It is also important that the relevant stakeholders are involved throughout the research process, and that all research is conducted within the fundamental principles of medical ethics. Support obtained should be followed up with accountability through a robust monitoring and evaluation process, production of quality results and appropriate communication of the research findings. Seasoned researchers also have a responsibility to the trainee researchers through mentorship, sharing of ideas and collaboration in research, in order to properly groom the nation's next breed of research talents.

Quality research is the bedrock of medicine. To meet the challenges of the 21st century and beyond, greater and sustained effort is needed by producers of evidence and government at all levels. Developing country researchers must also go beyond conducting research for the purpose of raising academic status alone to conducting research that will prompt action to improve the quality of life.

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