

Recent Publications

Tropical disease research: twenty years of collaboration

The twelfth programme report of the UN inter-agency programme on Tropical Disease Research is a celebration of 20 years of productive and coordinated effort to engage science in combat against the transmissible and infectious diseases which thrive in the poverty of the developing world.

The objectives of the programme, for which WHO acts as the executive agency, are twofold: to develop new tools to control tropical diseases, and to train individuals and strengthen institutions to increase the relevant research capability of less developed tropical countries. The focus of activity is directed to six diseases — malaria, schistosomiasis, the filariases, African and American trypanosomiasis, the leishmaniases and leprosy — which were selected having regard to their impact as public health problems, the absence of satisfactory methods of control, and the scientific potential for developing such methods.

The donations generously contributed by governments, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations and foundations, has enabled the secretariat in Geneva to develop a partnership with some 5000 scientists from 160 countries who collaborate in its activities. Relevant research of every nature is accommodated in the programme, from basic biomedical research — encompassing immunology, cell biology and biochemistry — to community-based field research. The current director of the programme, Dr Tore Godal, attributes the atmosphere of confidence and the track record of collaborative innovation — which are the hallmarks of the success of the programme — to four fundamental abilities:

- the ability to take risks and identify new opportunities;
- the ability to maintain research on a promising lead long enough to develop a useful product;

- the ability to invest truly in and around talented individuals;
- the ability to allow researchers to come up with their own solutions.

The last of these abilities has been fostered by inviting, though advertisement to the research community, applications to resolve problems which are often defined in very specific and narrow terms. This, experience has shown, has been of particular value in field research:

- it elicits excellent proposals from scientific groups previously unknown to have an interest in a specific area;
- it stimulates and facilitates further development of the initially proposed design, execution and analysis of the work, often within the context of a research capability strengthening exercise; and
- in the case of research focused on precise field activities, it enables the programme to inform interested governments and institutions of proposed projects before they have been funded, to obtain their approval, and to ensure their receptivity to the ultimate conclusions.

This issue of *WHO Drug Information* contains much that is of primary interest to less developed countries. Immense problems clearly remain to be tackled, but much that is encouraging is being achieved. The Tropical Disease Research Programme has been directly involved in many important aspects of the work that is reported. Where it has not been involved, its influence has had a pervasive catalytic effect in stimulating research and funding for research in those countries most in need of international support.

UNDP/World Bank/WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases. *Tropical disease research: progress 1975-1994: highlights 1993-1994. Twelfth programme report.* WHO, Geneva, 1995. ISBN 92 4 156179 3 (NLM Classification: WC 680).