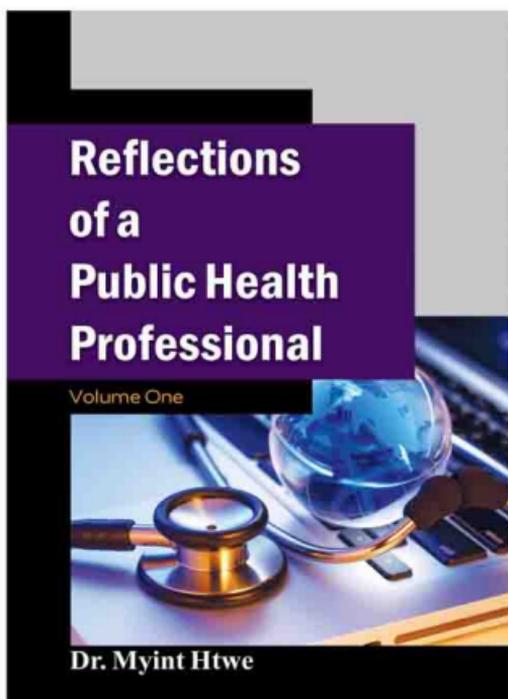


Research Institutions and National Health Development



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3. Research institutions and national health development

(This article is based on the presentation made at the symposium of 41st Myanmar Health Research Congress, Department of Medical Research, Lower Myanmar, Yangon, 10 January 2013).

It is a fact that health research is essential for the development of any country, including improvement of health status of the population at large. Research and development go hand in hand. Development in any area cannot proceed smoothly without basing it on relevant research findings. This idea needs to be ingrained and inculcated among health professionals working at various levels of the health care delivery system. To complement this idea, it is important to realign the thinking of young researchers and young medical graduates from the very beginning of their career. The whole spectrum of research process can definitely improve the skills of health professionals in critical thinking, as well as in analytical and epidemiological thinking skills.

We, therefore, need to find ways and means to further promoting the role of health research institutions (HRIs) in national health development. In Myanmar's context, universities cannot be considered research institutions (which are essentially research institutions in developed countries and in some developing countries) due to various reasons.

Reviewing the current scenario

In order to specifically strategize and effectively promote the role of HRIs in national health development, we first need to know the current situation of factors influencing this aspect. The following probes can yield many options for us to pursue further. It is, however, not exhaustive. The context of the probes is mixed, i.e., Myanmar as well as the international scenario.

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- Are there effective and sustainable linkages among HRIs and health institutions in the country? What types of linkages or platforms are available and are they functioning well? Is there any room for improvement?
- Are health research information systems (electronic and computerized) well established among HRIs and health institutions? If so, are they linked (electronically or otherwise) with service departments (Department of Public Health, Department of Medical Services, Department of Food and Drug Administration, Department of Human Resource for Health, Department of Medical Research, and Department of Traditional Medicine) of the Ministry of Health (MoH) and various universities under MoH?
- Are joint research projects carried out on a regular basis with service departments and universities under MoH? This is important from the utility perspective.
- Is sharing of important research findings practiced on a regular basis between HRIs, service departments and universities under MoH? How effective is the current mechanism, forum or platform? Is there any room for improvement?
- Are there researcher exchange programmes among HRIs and health institutions and also to some extent with service departments and universities?
- Are service departments closely involved in setting the research agenda? Is there any room for improvement? This is the key issue to promote the role of HRIs in national health development.
- To what extent are HRIs effectively and practically involved in national health planning exercises, national health policy, and strategy formulation, health interventions selection for various health projects and programmes?

- What is the general working relationship between HRIs and service departments? There are several aspects to be considered in reviewing this.
- Is the role of HRIs and health research spelled out, either explicitly or implicitly, in national health policy?
- What is the current funding situation of HRIs (national funding support and international funding support)?
- What is the degree of flexibility on external collaboration and networking with various extramural research institutions, organizations, agencies, universities, foundations or international nongovernmental organizations? Is there room for improvement? What are these?
- What is the current situation of regular capacity building programmes for young researchers in HRIs (intramural and extramural)? Has any recent evaluation been made on this and action taken?

The above probes will yield important preliminary information for us to move ahead in order to further promote, strengthen and increase the momentum of the role of HRIs in national health development. Any HRI in any country will not give a perfect response or fully satisfactory response to the above probes. After obtaining preliminary responses from the above probing questions, we may quickly embark on intensive in-house brainstorming sessions. Here we need to practice free and frank discussions and exchange of ideas and experiences using various management techniques (Delphi, Delbecq, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, proper brainstorming or brain writing methods). Practical and sustainable ideas or strategies should be selected without considering the source, i.e., irrespective of the position or rank of the staff member. It is also essential that we need to think out-of-the-box and change our mindsets as much as possible.

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Before identifying the possible course of action, it would be useful that key projects, programmes, strategies and interventions of service departments are known to professionals of HRIs. The mission statement and key strategies of the HRIs should be thoroughly reviewed in the context of the contemporary scenario. Human resource situation of HRIs should be quickly reviewed and analyzed.

What are the possible options or activities that we can contemplate to promote the role of HRIs in national health development?

The below mentioned activities could be jointly worked out between the professionals of HRIs and service departments of MoH. It is to be emphasized and also important to note that HRIs are not meddling in the affairs of service departments but supporting them in achieving their objectives in the context of overall national health development. The following facts must be clearly understood by all the parties involved.

- Be involved in prioritization and resource allocation of health projects and programmes in national health plan of MoH based on research findings;
- Jointly identify research areas/agenda including administrative, operational, logistics and management aspects of certain priority projects and programmes;
- Jointly develop and implement research proposals (PI or Co-PI must be from service department);
- Provide orientation training on operational research, implementation research, and translational research to professionals of service departments on a regular basis as there is rapid turn-over of staff in service departments;
- Conduct research utilization workshops with follow-ups.
- Conduct joint review/evaluation of priority health projects and programmes of national importance;

- Assist in monitoring, evaluation and surveys conducted by service departments;
- Collaborate in analyzing data generated by health information units of service departments;
- There should be compulsory participation of professionals from service departments (MoH should facilitate this) in research congress and important research meetings;
- Identify ways and means to inculcate research culture in service departments. It could be done phases and stepwise.

Apart from the above, HRIs should simultaneously consider implementing or augmenting the following aspects:

- Technical soundness of young researchers must be ensured;
- Sense of collaboration should be inculcated in each and every young researcher;
- Sense of team spirit and team approach should be enhanced in each and every young researcher;
- Responsible conduct of research (RCR) should be promoted; Research ethics should be strictly practiced.

Conclusion

Some of the determining factors in successfully promoting the role of HRIs in national health development are as follows: good working relationships, good understanding, team spirit and approach, equal partnership, sharing of knowledge and experience, responsible conduct of research, etc. This could also increase the importance and prestige of HRIs in the country in the context of national health development.

It is also proposed to conduct a national seminar on this subject for in-depth discussions. The output of this seminar could set the tone for furthering the importance and essential role of HRIs in national health development. Following the national seminar, it could prove useful, on a long-term perspective,

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if an executive summary of the important role that HRIs can play in national health development is prepared for informing policy makers and key parliamentary members. At the time when service departments are challenged by complex issues and problems, they must draw upon the strengths and assets of HRIs. HRIs can also stand ready if an extensive review of its *modus operandi* is made and corrective measures taken. It is hoped that this article will help to inspire and encourage researchers to adopt a strategic approach with regard to their roles in national health development.