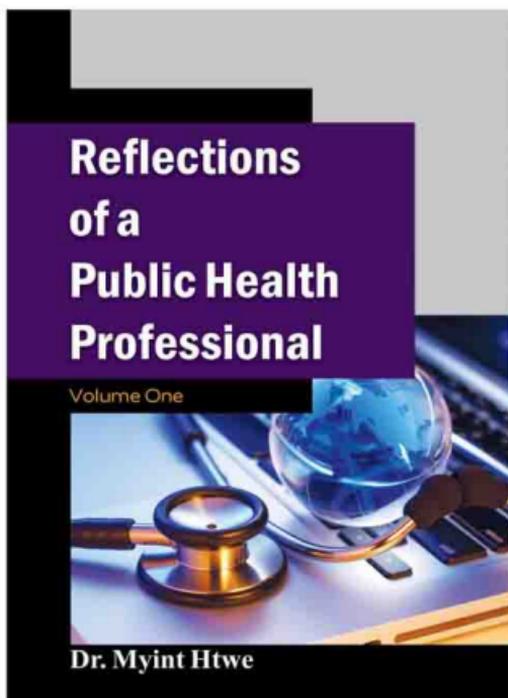


# Strengthening Health Research Institutions in Support of Public Health



**Dr Myint Htwe**

## **2. Strengthening health research institutions in support of public health**

*(Based on the article written in the magazine in commemoration of 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Department of Medical Research - Upper Myanmar & presentation titled “Promoting the Role of Research Institutions in National Health Development” made by the author at the symposium of 41<sup>st</sup> Myanmar Health Research Congress, Department of Medical Research (Lower Myanmar), 10 January 2013).*

The public health domain includes a wide array of entities ranging from public health workers (community-based health workforce, project managers to epidemiologists) with different technical backgrounds to health systems and institutions down to sub-rural health centres. Public health and research domains are inherently linked and support each other positively. The smooth functioning of the health research domain is essential to fast-track the efficient performance of the health care delivery system in the country which is necessary for improving the overall health status of the population.

The health care delivery system has two major functions, i.e., curative and public health. The performance of the health care delivery system depends on several factors some of which are beyond the control of the Ministry of Health. It is the duty of researchers or research institutions to find out these factors, (by way of conducting “*implementation research*”, as well as various qualitative and quantitative research) which may vary from one geographical location to another and from time to time and also from different characteristics of professionals running the health system. In other words, epidemiologic triad (time, place and person) determines whether the health system performs well or not in the context of overall public health functions. Similarly, curative functions of the health care delivery system can

also be supported and improved by means of conducting clinical research and operational research on several aspects of hospital performance, both general and specialist hospitals, located in the country. The country's overall health domain can only be improved if one takes into account both the curative and public health functions.

Out of the spectrum of different types of research available, "implementation research" is one of the avenues by which one can determine the status of public health functions of the health system in terms of exposing the interaction of the epidemiologic triad. The public health functions, especially, can be improved to a greater extent by way of applying the findings of "implementation research".

Implementation research is used as a general term for research that focuses on the question, *"What is happening" in the design, implementation, management and administration, logistical operations, services delivered and outcomes of projects and programmes.*<sup>2</sup> In other words, implementation research can assist in streamlining logistics, management, and administrative aspects as well as enhancing technical perspectives of various projects and programmes of the health care delivery system.

In order to do so, it is important to brush up the research domain. The strength of the research domain depends on availability of several key determinants or factors, such as:

- (i) *Sound and rational national health research policy and strategies;*
- (ii) *Technical capability and capacity of researchers;*
- (iii) *Presence of a system of good research management practice;*
- (iv) *Dynamic and responsive research information system;*
- (v) *Well established research culture not only in research institutions but also in schools and universities;*
- (vi) *Effective networking among research and health institutions;*

## *Reflections of a Public Health Professional*

- (vii) Practicing responsible conduct of research;*
- (viii) Well established “Ethics Review Committee” or “Institutional Review Board”;*
- (ix) Adhering to research ethics in conducting research;*
- (x) Dynamic research monitoring system for technical, management, administrative, logistics, human resource, infrastructure and financial aspects; and*
- (xi) Broad-minded and forward looking senior research managers who execute good research management practice.<sup>1</sup>*

In developing as well as in developed countries, all these factors may not be available in desirable perspectives and proportion or functioning smoothly. This is natural. These factors could be promoted through the combined and concerted efforts of all stakeholders involved in this endeavour. However, a robust and dynamic national health research policy together with supporting key strategies will ultimately determine whether the research domain is on the right track or not.

It is essential to strengthen the above factors in a phase-wise and step-wise approach, with reasonable budgetary support from the government and other sources. *Resource flow analysis* in research<sup>3</sup> is required to elicit the situation and trend of the funding scenario so that appropriate remedial measures and due attention could be made for its growth and sustainability.

Each research institution is generally guided by a variety of institutional guidelines and system of work such as:

- (i) Availability of updated vision and mission statement;*
- (ii) Availability of updated institutional research ethical guidelines for its researchers;*
- (iii) Availability of updated institutional guidelines for responsible conduct of research;*

- (iv) *Dynamic institutional framework for research information system;*
- (v) *Availability of updated institutional guidelines for establishing good research management practice;*
- (vi) *General guidelines for establishing regular capacity building activities (both intramural and extramural) for incoming young researchers together with effective mentoring system for them;*
- (vii) *Guidelines for networking with other research institutions both within and outside the country;*
- (viii) *A system of career ladder for researchers;*
- (ix) *A system of researcher exchange programme between research institutions as well as with health institutions, both nationally and internationally;*
- (x) *Presence of regular forum or platform for researchers, clinicians and public health professionals especially for identifying research agenda and research utilization;*
- (xi) *Presence of practical and down-to-earth research monitoring system;*
- (xii) *Framework for resource mobilization, rational resource allocation together with resource flow analysis annually; and*
- (xiii) *Compulsory issuance of the annual or biennial report of the research institution, including a chapter on critical analysis on strengths and weaknesses and suggestions for research planning and improvement.<sup>1</sup>*

These guidelines, framework and system of work would definitely facilitate inculcation of good research culture among researchers and make research institutions strong and independent. For all these activities, *the prime mover is the head of the research institution* with unwavering support from policy makers. The head is, in fact, the chief research architect who is responsible for the institution's sustainability, growth, and progress. In other words, the *chief research architect must possess excellent research management*

## *Reflections of a Public Health Professional*

*skills* to move the research institution to greater heights. Researchers, by nature of their work, generally acquire good epidemiological thinking skill, analytical and critical thinking capability<sup>1</sup>.

In conclusion, it can be confidently said that *efficient performance of health care delivery system could not be achieved without the support of a strong research domain* in the country. Therefore, the abovementioned factors must be put in place with assurance and understanding from the policy makers. Let us work together to achieve our objective of improving the overall health status of the population with full involvement of researchers.

## **References**

1. *Strengthening Research Domain to Improve the Performance of Health Care Delivery System in the country*, by Dr. Myint Htwe. Magazine issued in commemoration of 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Department of Medical Research (Upper Myanmar), 2014.
2. *A Guide to Implementation Research*, by Alan Werner, Urban Institute Press (ISBN 0-87766-724-1)
3. *Monitoring Financial Flows for Health Research*. Global Forum for Health Research 2001. ISBN 2-940286-05-1. [www.globalforumhealth.org](http://www.globalforumhealth.org)

(NB. This article appeared in the Bulletin of Preventive and Social Medicine Society, Volume 1 Number 3, June 2015).