PROVISIONAL AGENDA ITEM 23

DEVELOPMENT OF BIOMEDICAL AND HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH
(INCLUDING RESEARCH STRENGTHENING AND CAREER STRUCTURES)

Report by the Regional Director

Since the Western Pacific Advisory Committee on Medical Research (WPACMR) was created in 1976, the recommendations made at its annual sessions have been presented to the Regional Committee for endorsement, together with a report on implementation of recommendations endorsed by the Regional Committee at previous sessions and the utilization of contributions for research activities to the Voluntary Fund for Health Promotion.

The present report (1) contains information on the use of funds, both regular and extrabudgetary, which became available in 1979 for implementation of the recommendations of WPACMR endorsed by the Regional Committee; (2) sets out, for review and endorsement by the Regional Committee, a summary of recommendations made by WPACMR at its fifth session in April 1980; (3) synthesizes evolution in regional research management mechanisms; and (4) brings to the attention of the Regional Committee the desirability of strengthening national research management capabilities by encouraging the establishment of national health research councils in Member States.
1. REPORT ON THE USE OF FUNDS

The fifth session of the Western Pacific Advisory Committee on Medical Research (WPACMR) was held in Manila in April 1980. Members reviewed the progress made in implementing the recommendations of the fourth session, endorsed by the Regional Committee at its thirtieth session, which were funded from the regular budget and the Voluntary Fund for Health Promotion.\(^1\) The total amount spent in 1979 in support of research activities was US$751,071, of which US$184,266 were contributed by the Japan Shipbuilding Industry Foundation (JSIF). All the JSIF funds were disbursed, for research grants (US$114,331), research training (US$57,195) and for a research study carried out by a consultant in Papua New Guinea on community support in the control of leprosy and tuberculosis (US$12,740).

Concurrently with the slight increase in funds for research from regional sources, increased support was provided to countries or areas of the Region from the UNDP/World Bank/WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR) and the Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (HRP). In 1979, TDR provided US$1.54 million and HRP US$1.67 million.

2. COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMME OF RESEARCH

The main recommendations and programme expectations of WPACMR, expressed at its fifth session, are given below:

2.1 Strengthening of national research capability

With a view to encouraging coordination of health research activities, WHO is requested to pursue vigorously with national authorities the establishment of national focal points or national health research councils. Following the Working Group on Medical Research Councils held in Manila in February 1980 a similar meeting is being proposed for 1982.

The information base for the formulation of policies to improve the career structures of research workers in developing countries is weak. WPACMR agreed that a career structure for research workers could not be considered in isolation but only as part of an overall national commitment to research development. More information is being collected on the current situation with regard to career structures and, with collaboration from the Office of Research Promotion and Development, WHO, Geneva, a report on the subject will be prepared for presentation to the sixth session.

Progress has been made, in the areas of biostatistics, epidemiology and entomology, in enhancing the capabilities of the WHO Regional Centre for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur, to strengthen the regional research programme, particularly with a view to technical cooperation among developing countries. A large-scale population-based study on endemic diseases is planned for the State of Sabah, Malaysia. Preparations are being made to improve data processing through the computer facilities provided by TDR in Kuala Lumpur. Attention will also be focused on strengthening the Institute of Medical Research, Goroka, Papua New Guinea, and on the development of collaboration between it and the Regional Centre in Kuala Lumpur. At the same Institute in Goroka, WHO-supported research activities in acute respiratory infections are also contributing to institution strengthening.

Following the feasibility study carried out by a WHO consultant in 1978, plans are being developed for strengthening the Wellcome Virus Laboratory, Fiji as a sub-regional virus laboratory.

2.2 Research within WHO programmes of technical cooperation

A number of important research and training activities are being generated in relation to clonorchiasis and paragonimiasis. In the Republic of Korea, research is continuing on the treatment of cases of paragonimiasis with new drugs. Current research in China centres on the taxonomy and life cycle of flukes, the development of diagnostic tests and drug trials.

Strategies for the development of a regional programme on diarrhoeal diseases research and control have been developed by the WPACMR Sub-Committee on Diarrhoeal Diseases. Further efforts will be made to promote the preparation of sound research proposals capable of attracting extrabudgetary funding.

Research on acute respiratory infections (ARI) is progressing in Papua New Guinea, with cooperation at a substantial level from WHO. The programme will be further expanded to include research activities in Malaysia and the Philippines. The final aim of the programme is to bring about better management of acute respiratory infections at primary health care level so as to reduce mortality.

Efforts to promote and develop schistosomiasis research have started to yield dividends and a greater number of activities are expected in the years to come.

Research being carried out on cardiovascular and metabolic diseases was reviewed and priorities in relation to specific areas identified. Research training will be conducted in the epidemiology of the two diseases. Promotion of research and control will focus on diabetes among the Polynesian and Micronesian island populations.
A one-week seminar on tropical immunology, jointly funded by the Australian Development Assistance Bureau, the Australian Society for Immunology and WHO, was conducted in Sydney in December 1979. The interest of Australian immunologists in undertaking collaborative activities relating to the application of modern immunological techniques was clearly demonstrated during the seminar and WHO will draw on their expertise in the future.

Scientists in the Region will be encouraged to develop research proposals on vector biology and control, especially biological control, for submission for support to the appropriate scientific working group of TDR.

The regional health services research programme, an essential strategy for achieving the goal of health/2000, has expanded substantially, and is now entering the implementation phase. The Sub-Committee on Health Services Research of the global Advisory Committee on Medical Research met in Manila in April 1980. Thus further impetus was provided to programme development. The need for well-prepared research proposals to attract extrabudgetary funding cannot be overemphasized.

2.3 Training in research methodology

Preparations are under way to organize a national workshop on biomedical research methodology for senior research workers in China in late 1980, with a view to training them at their own institutes as trainers in this important field. It is proposed to hold a similar intercountry course at the WHO Regional Centre for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, Kuala Lumpur in 1981.

In view of the importance of the rapid diagnosis of dengue fever, a regional workshop on detecting dengue viruses by the mosquito inoculation technique was held at the WHO Regional Centre for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, Kuala Lumpur, in late 1979. Attended by 13 participants from 9 countries or areas of the Region, it contributed to promotion of the practical use of the technique for the rapid diagnosis of dengue fever.

Training courses on the serology of parasitic diseases, using the enzyme-linked-immuno sorbent assay (ELISA) technique, were held in Malaysia and the Republic of Korea in March 1980. A further group activity will be organized in 1981 to promote the use of this technique for immunodiagnosis.

Problems related to the career development of epidemiologists stem from lack of understanding of the epidemiological approach in public health practice, particularly in the planning and evaluation of health services. The topic attracted attention at the Working Group on Medical Research Councils, which recommended that career structures should be developed for epidemiologists. Subject to the availability of funds, an intercountry seminar is planned for senior health administrators on the use of epidemiology in health services.

A course on the epidemiology and community-based control of cardiovascular diseases will be held in collaboration with the Government of Singapore in September 1980.
3. MANAGEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH

3.1 Research training

Despite the small disbursement for research training (US$123,215), 22 research training grants were awarded during 1979, mostly to researchers from developing countries in the Region.

3.2 Research grants

Research grants amounted to a total of US$222,930 in 1978. In 1979, a further 20 proposals were supported at a total cost of US$182,031. Grants awarded in the Region were for studies on health problems of regional importance such as acute respiratory infections, dengue haemorrhagic fever, schistosomiasis and those caused by liver and lung flukes. In all, research studies in 16 countries or areas of the Region were supported from both regional and global resources.

3.3 Management of regional resources for research

From 1979, approximately one half of the resources available for research promotion and development are being allocated to individual technical cooperation programmes, heralding a significant attempt to increase the responsibility of programme managers in programming research components as an integral part of their development activities, thus relating research to the solution of health problems of regional and national importance. A mechanism is being developed to involve programme managers in assessing, managing and monitoring research proposals. The Medical Officer, Research Promotion and Development is now mainly responsible for the operation and control of the research management mechanisms being developed.

The research promotion and development programme budget for 1980-1981 reflects the following significant trends:

- a reduction in provisions for meetings;
- an increase in provisions for research grants;
- an increase in provisions for the strengthening of research capability in selected institutions.

Whereas meetings and the services of consultants were necessary to establish the foundation of the research promotion and development programme, the percentage of resources utilized for such activities has been rightly diminishing since 1978, with a consequent increase in the amounts available for research grants to individuals and institutes.
Through dissemination of information on the WHO regional research programme, further efforts should be made to increase the number of countries within which research grants are awarded and to select better research proposals, so as to obtain greater dividends from the limited investment WHO is able to make in research in the Region. Research grants should also contribute to the strengthening of research institutions in developing countries. It is proposed therefore that a policy should be adopted of supporting research studies in institutes rather than giving grants to individuals.

3.4 Exchange of research information

In 1980 a consultant on biomedical information exchange will develop mechanisms for the regular exchange of information on research as well as the measures needed to improve library services to research institutes in the Region.

3.5 Interregional cooperation

Close cooperation in the field of research promotion and development has been maintained with the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia.

3.6 Membership of the Western Pacific Advisory Committee on Medical Research (WPACMR)

Professor Sir Gustav Nossal, the first Chairman, and three WPACMR members, retired after the fifth session in April 1980. Sir Gustav contributed immensely to development of the regional research programme during its critical formative phase. He has been replaced as Chairman by Professor Hiroshi Tanaka of Japan. There will now be 13 members of the Advisory Committee.

4. CONCLUSION

Although substantial funds to support the greater involvement of the Region in health research activities became available only in September 1977, the impact is already discernible. Keen interest has been generated in establishing national focal points for the effective management and coordination of health research. Awareness of the importance of undertaking research relevant to national health goals is growing. A greater number of research grants have been awarded from regional resources to workers in Member States. Resources for research, including trained manpower, are gradually increasing.