Reviewer’s report

Title: Overview of research activities associated with the World Health Organization: results of a survey covering 2006/07.

Version: 1 Date: 12 August 2010

Reviewer: Martin McKee

Reviewer’s report:

This paper provides a valuable overview of the research associated with the WHO. It is another demonstration of the great advances in research oversight and governance by staff of the organization in recent years. The authors describe the challenges involved in undertaking an exercise of this nature and it is revealing that, despite their strenuous efforts, significant gaps remain. The limitations are recognised; there are intractable difficulties in deciding what funds should be allocated to the heading of research but the authors have adopted a pragmatic response that is sufficient to paint a meaningful picture. At some future date it would be helpful to complement this exercise with qualitative research to assess what staff mean by “being involved in research” as, in my experience, this is quite variable. I assume it was not possible to differentiate research funding by DALY according to whether it was core budget or extra-budgetary (this should be stated). The findings are unexpected but it is very helpful to have data to quantify the various parameters.

My only concerns relate to presentation of results. The absence of captions for the figures meant that some detective work was required to determine what they meant. It is usual to number the figures in the order they are mentioned in the text. Furthermore, given that the paper will be reproduced in black and white, it would be useful to attach the category labels to the pie sections alongside the percentages – this is easily done in Excel. For figures 3 and 4, what scale was used to assess degree of support before normalisation? We need more technical information here. Better labelling of the bubble charts (bearing in mind that they will often be viewed in B&W) is also needed.

A final thought; the authors have looked at WHO Headquarters. It would be helpful if they could call for similar exercises to be conducted in regional offices.

In summary, this brief paper provides a useful snapshot of WHO’s research activities, although it has a number of largely inevitable limitations, recognised by the authors.

Major compulsory revisions: None

Minor essential revisions:
1. label, redraw, and re-order figures as above
2. better description of scales in radar chart
3. mention of division of spending by DALY according to core or extra-budgetary
resources
Discretionary revisions
Some discussion of the points raised above

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I am a member of WHO's Advisory Committee on Health Research, which has been calling for this sort of work to be done.