Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 16 August 2010

Reviewer: Charles A. Gardner

Reviewer's report:

Minor essential revisions:

(1) This paper represents the first comprehensive effort to review research activities associated with WHO HQ. It presents a useful birds eye view of a complex organization, and develops methodologies that may be fine-tuned in future evaluations of this kind (a point the authors should make themselves).

(2) The authors' use of the terms "type I, II and II diseases" may cause confusion for some readers. In this paper, the terms distinguish among (I) communicable, maternal, perinatal and nutritional diseases, (II) non-communicable diseases, and (III) injuries, war and violence. Most people in the field of global health consider "type I diseases" to be those that are incident in both rich and poor countries, "type II diseases" to be those that are incident in both rich and poor countries BUT with the majority of diseases burden in poor countries, and "type II diseases to be those that are overwhelmingly or exclusively incident in poor countries.

(3) Add a sentence to the abstract to the effect that this study may help the WHO and its external donors in balancing research priorities, especially given the imbalance in support for communicable etc. versus non-communicable diseases research.

(4) Abstract Conclusion, 1st sentence: change "...research this approach..." to "...research. This approach..."

(5) Background, last sentence: change "...secondary research and capacity building; and..." to "...secondary research and research capacity building, and..."

(6) Figure 2 legend, last sentence: change "...majority of funds WHO disperses are designated funding that are earmarked..." to "...majority of research funds WHO disperses are earmarked..."

(7) Conclusions, 3rd paragraph, second sentence: change "...40% of DALY. This is comparable to 4% allocated to Type II (non-communicable diseases) which contributes to 48% of DALY." to "...40% of global DALY, while 4% is allocated to Type II (non-communicable) diseases which contribute to 48% of DALY. [NEED TO EXPLAIN WHAT DALYs ARE?]"

(8) Conclusions, 3rd paragraph, last sentence: change "...between the donors..."
to "...between the goals of donors..."

(9) Conclusions, 4th paragraph, 2nd sentence: Make this a new paragraph, and consider shifting this to later discussion of "getting WHO's own house in order to set an example to partners and member countries." As is, this sentence does not seem to address the issues that precede it.

Discretionary revisions:

(1) The authors may wish to point out the importance of WHO "getting its own house in order" to set an example to its partners and member countries.

(2) WHO involvement in research capacity building does not come through; some additional discussion of these activities may add value to the paper.

(3) WHO involvement in "routine disease surveillance" is an essential research activity. The authors state clearly that such efforts were not included in their analysis. But perhaps some discussion of this issue would add value to the paper.

(4) Background or Conclusions section could discuss concept of WHO's "normative role," which makes it appropriate for the majority of staff effort to be devoted to secondary research and research capacity building. Doing versus using research.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest 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 declare that I have no competing interests.

From 2007 to 2008 I was a short term consultant to the WHO. However, I do not believe this affects my judgement on this paper, nor do I believe that the publication of this manuscript will cause any financial gain or loss either by the WHO or by the Global Forum for Health Research, an independent non-profit for which I currently work. Stocks, shares, and patents are not applicable.