Author’s response to reviews

Title: Social sciences research in neglected tropical diseases 2: A bibliographic analysis.

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear HARPS Editorial Team,

Revisions: MS: 1071028603959687

Social sciences research in neglected tropical diseases 2: A bibliographic analysis.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the two referees’ comments and submit a revised manuscript. We were delighted to observe that both referees thought the article was important to the field and at least one referee sought not compulsory revisions.

We found the comments of both referees to be constructive and helpful and have revised the manuscript accordingly. On some occasions we did not agree with the suggested changes, and explain below why we did not act on them. Where changes have been made in the text, they are in a blue coloured typeface.

Response to Referees’ Comments

Referee 1

Requested “no compulsory revisions,” but raised three substantive points.

1. The reasons for choosing the four particular diseases.

The section under ‘The Diseases’ in the METHODS has been revised to reflect the choice of the disease on which we focused.

Following Referee 1’s lead (expanded by Referee 2) we have also added to the limitations of this study a discussion of the extent to which the choice of disease will affect the overall conclusions (Paragraph 2 of the DISCUSSION)

Referee 1 also raised the point about looking at grant funding as an alternative set of data. This is the subject of another of the papers in this series with Subhash Pokhrel as lead author.
2. Is this a competition between biomedical and social scientists?
We think this is an important, and tough point. Our argument is about the need for interdisciplinary research and we argue for this, but we also argue that there needs to be more social sciences research. We take the point, however, that the article takes a robust position against the dominance of biomedical science. Nonetheless, the social sciences are so poorly represented in this area that concession is the wrong starting position. The article needs to make a strong point in the tradition of Peter Hotez's uncompromising advocacy for the centrality of biomedicine in the NTDs, and the need to reduce the presence of the social sciences.

3. The phrase “flat world” is used repeatedly
Point taken! The phrase has been removed entirely from the CONCLUSION, and once in the DISCUSSION.

Referee 2
Raised six substantive points and a series of editorial comments.

1. Include prevalence data in Table 1
Referee 2 asked that we include additional details in Table 1: prevalence in particular. Referee 2 argued that “high prevalence also perhaps predicts and reflects the degree of funding overall that is available for a disease. Could it be that the number of social science articles is somehow related to the volume of money available for research?” This argument is an important one, but not central to this paper, and is largely addressed in another of the papers in this series with Subhash Pokhrel as lead author.

As a technical aside, incidence data for dengue and chikungunya is probably more interpretable than prevalence data, where prevalence probably makes more sense for onchocerciasis and visceral leishmaniasis. How the mix of incidence and prevalence would the flow through to a comparison with other diseases is not clear and it seemed better to avoid it.

2. The manuscript only considers published research
A comment explaining this has been added to the first paragraph of the METHODS.

3. The authors look at articles in journals not books
Clarification has been added to the paragraph on data sources in the METHODS, including a reference to the fact that (a) social sciences have historically published more in books than the biomedical sciences, and (b) this pattern has been changing with the social sciences tending to publish in journals more. This is reinforced in the last sentence of paragraph 2 in the Discussion and the following numbered point.

4. The use of “social science themes” was not defined
We do not define the themes, but have reworded the last paragraph of the RESULTS to clarify our intent.

5. The role of funders but not curriculum is emphasised in the paper. Changing curricula so that they are more interdisciplinary in nature is an important idea. It is, however, one stepped removed from the funder-researcher interaction, where we think this paper is better focused.

6. The suggested role of TDR makes a surprising conclusion. On reflection, we agree and have removed this.

Editorial comments
We have addressed the enumeration of 3 and not 4 problems
We do not agree that the terminology is too loosely used. There are clear references to treatment and prevention (vaccine development) as part of biomedical research in the text.
The incorrectly place full-stop in the section on Visceral Leishmaniasis has been removed.