Reviewer's report

Title: New Directions for Research: Bridging Divisive Gaps to Advance Global Health Equity

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Reviewer: Dermot Maher

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This Commentary provides a useful opportunity to share with a wider audience a summary of the proceedings of the Harvard Symposium earlier this year on “New directions for global health research”.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The title should indicate that the Commentary is a report on the proceedings, or at last the highlights, of the Harvard Symposium.

2. The Abstract should also indicate that this is essentially a report on the symposium.

3. The Commentary is a mix of a report on the content of the symposium (the two sections “Strengthening national health research systems” and “Establishing global health research partnerships”) and of what appear to be the authors’ personal views and opinions (the section “Closing divisive gaps” and the Conclusion”). The authors should clarify the parts of the text which reflect the content of the symposium and the parts which reflect their personal views.

4. A slightly more nuanced view of the contribution of health research to health improvements would be useful in the Introduction (and reflected in the Abstract). The statement in the Abstract that “Much of the health gains achieved in the 20th century can be attributed to the advancement of knowledge” begs the question “how much?” – this is a very contentious issue. While this isn’t the right opportunity to explore in detail the much debated question of how much health research has contributed to health improvements, compared with the contribution of improved living conditions, it would be useful to put health research into a broader context of social and economic developments which have a huge impact on health (and which also favour health research). “Life expectancy has more than doubled” (where?) – health research has played an important part but isn’t by any means the whole story.

5. In setting the scene in the Introduction, the authors should briefly refer to the global economic crisis, which has considerable implications in exacerbating global problems of lack of health equity and at the same time in threatening the funding of research aimed at advancing global health equity.

6. Concerning the statement in the Introduction on the considerably increased
development assistance for health from 2000 to 2007, an indication would be useful of the levels of development assistance for health research over the same period.

7. In stating in the Introduction that “The 20th anniversary of the report provided an occasion to review progress and re-launch a movement around research”, the authors provide a tantalizing promise of a renewed movement without delivering any concrete indication of what the renewed movement may be like, how it will be formed and what it will do. The Conclusion may be the right place to provide these specifics, if they were delineated as an outcome of the symposium.

8. In the section “Strengthening national health research systems” (2nd para, 1st sentence), the authors refer to building capacity so that even the poorest nations are able to uptake knowledge created as a global public good”. This needs to be accompanied by a clear indication of the need for capacity building so that even the poorest nations are able to generate knowledge in contribution to knowledge as a global public good. This is partly but not explicitly covered in the next paragraph.

9. In the section “Strengthening national health research systems” (4th para, last sentence), the authors refer to the many collaborations with developing country scientists described by Dr Ghaffar – a brief mention of the purpose and value of those collaborations would be useful, otherwise it may look like collaborations for collaborations’ sake.

10. In the section “Establishing global health research partnerships” (2nd para, 2nd sentence) a brief description of the new WHO initiative would be useful so readers can understand what is new about it and what benefit might come out of the planned conference in Montreux.

11. In the section “Establishing global health research partnerships” (2nd para, 3rd sentence) a brief explanation would be useful of what the positive gains were that “have been fostered through a steady series of similar global conferences”.

12. In the section “Closing divisive gaps” (4th para) a brief critical view of the development of new public-private partnerships would be useful. From the description given everything sounds marvellous, but what problems have there been and what drawbacks may be associated with them? For example, various problems have been identified regarding the role of the Gates Foundation, which is very much involved in several public-private partnerships (Lancet Editorial 2009; 373: 1,577).

13. Some critical comment is also needed on the often disappointing extent of private sector involvement in global health partnerships. For example, the contribution of the private sector to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria has been a very small proportion of funding, which is nearly all from governments.

14. In the section “Closing divisive gaps” (last para), although a reference is given in support of the statement of the need to reconcile excellence and
relevance, it’s not immediately apparent why this is so, and a brief explanation would be useful.

Discretionary Revisions

15. In addition to the gaps summarized in the Abstract and indicated in the text, the authors might consider another gap which new directions in research should address to advance global health equity, that between clinical medicine and public health (Maher D, Harries AD. Quality care: a link between clinical and public health approaches to HIV infection in developing countries. Tropical Medicine and International Health 2010; 15 (4): 391-395).

16. In the Introduction (2nd para, 2nd sentence), the authors refer to enhanced research capacity which has been promoted in developing countries. Promotion and development of capacity are two different things – is there room for a brief critical comment on the degree to which efforts in promoting have succeeded in developing capacity?

17. In the section “Establishing global health research partnerships” (2nd para, last sentence), the sense of the sentence about the new US initiative financed by PEPFAR “to build medical school capacity in key countries to balance research capacity for joining health partnerships” isn’t completely clear.

18. In the section “Establishing global health research partnerships”, perhaps “better” or “improved” architecture is better than “more optimal architecture”. In the Conclusion (2nd para), is it really the evidence that needs to be adapted to local circumstances? Or the way in which evidence is used? The maxim “adapt rather than adopt” is usually ascribed to Halfdan Mahler.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.