

## Evidence-based action needed on health systems

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Weaknesses in health systems are increasingly becoming recognised as major barriers to the achievement of improved health in low-income countries. A series of articles on health systems begins this week in *The Lancet* which seeks to stimulate discussion about how best these deficiencies can be addressed. The first article focuses on inequities in health and suggests how such inequities might be overcome. The series also addresses key issues such as the evidence underpinning policies to recruit, train, motivate, and retain the health personnel needed and approaches to sustainable financing of health systems. Other articles cover how to scale-up effective interventions to reach those who can most benefit, and how to ensure that research findings can influence policy and practice more effectively.

The articles are appearing in the run up to the Ministerial Summit on Health Research in Mexico next month, and will culminate in an issue of *The Lancet* featuring several papers reporting the findings of research projects on health-systems issues<sup>1</sup> as well as accompanying Comment. The Summit will bring together ministers and other policy-makers from a range of countries, together with researchers and representatives of research-funding bodies, to discuss how research can contribute to the improvement of health worldwide, including the attainment of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

Two earlier articles outlined the health-systems constraints<sup>2</sup> and presented a tentative research agenda<sup>3</sup> to deliver new knowledge that could help policy-makers overcome these constraints. The development of a health systems research agenda is being undertaken through an international consultative process coordinated by a task force convened by WHO that will outline its recommendations in Mexico. Hopefully the discussions in Mexico will lead to concerted national and international action to overcome the barriers standing in the way of improved health for disadvantaged populations around the world.

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We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

- 1 Haines A, Victora C, Horton R. *The Lancet's* series on health systems research: a call for papers. *Lancet* 2004; **363**: 261–62.
- 2 Travis P, Bennett S, Haines A, et al. Overcoming health-systems constraints to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. *Lancet* 2004; **364**: 900–06.
- 3 Task Force on Health Systems Research. Informed choices for attaining the Millennium Development Goals: towards an international cooperative agenda for health systems research. *Lancet* 2004; **364**: 997–1003.