Chapter 14

Building Sustainable Capacity in Health Research through e-Learning in Resource Constrained Countries

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ABSTRACT

Social determinants like income level, nutrition, education, occupation, gender, and poverty influence the health status of an individual, resulting in wide disparities in the health status of different socio-economic groups. Efforts to reduce health inequities can be strengthened by incorporating a Social Determinants of Health approach in creating Health Care policy. This will require an increase in the number of scientists in low and middle-income countries, with the necessary skills. This chapter focuses on a novel capacity building approach, adopted by a European Union funded project, entitled “Asian Regional Capacity Development for Research on Social Determinants of Health”. The project uses innovative educational technologies to deliver education and training that would be helpful in building new research training capacity on social determinants of health, in low and middle-income countries. The capacity building approach adopted by the project, will reduce brain drain, is more climate friendly and also encourage gender equity within low and middle-income country-based training.

INTRODUCTION

The increased use of e-Learning, has become a common feature globally, providing cost effective solutions to bridge the gap between the supply and demand crisis faced by health systems research. Health inequities exist within and between countries and are prevalent in low and middle income countries (LMICs). Health equity can be improved by incorporating social determinants of health approach into policy. This requires an increased number of scientists with the necessary interdisciplinary skills. Currently there is a lack of national capacity in low and middle income countries of people with the neces-

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sary interdisciplinary skills. This is a barrier to revitalize primary health care and attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are time bound targets, adopted at the Millenium Summit in 2000, to reduce extreme poverty by the year 2015 (Millenium Project, 2006). It is thus critical to strengthen the health research capacity in resource constrained countries (Sithi & Somrongthong, 2010).

The development of innovative educational technologies (van de Wende, 2003) has led to the implementation of an increasing number of multimedia-based e-Learning approaches to curriculum delivery around the world (Tinio, 2003). The increasing use of educational technologies in supporting teaching and learning, the increased accessibility of the Internet, has led researchers to suggest that e-Learning can be used to give a larger audience access to flexible and high quality teaching at a greatly reduced cost (Bates, 1995). The aim of this chapter is to present a region wide approach, developed by the Asian Regional Capacity Development for Research on Social Determinants of Health (ARCADE RSDH) project, which by the integration of e-Learning, has developed an innovative education model to strengthen the research capacity in resource constrained countries.

BACKGROUND

Importance of Health Research

The social determinants of health (SDH) are the conditions into which people are born, live, work, and age, including the area of health system. These conditions play a critical role in maintaining the health status of the people. They are risk factors found in one’s living and working conditions (like distribution of income, wealth, influence, and power), rather than individual factors (like behavioural risk factors or genetics) which influence the risk of disease or increases vulnerability to disease or injury. The social determinants of health are shaped by the distribution of money, power, and resources at global, national, and local levels and are mostly responsible for health inequities – the unavoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries. (WHO, Social Determinants of Health, 2012)

Health inequities are a major concern and are a key focus for policy makers in low and middle income countries. Reducing health inequities can improve outcomes for public health programmes, while also promoting social justice and human right to health. (Whitehead, 1992; Lee, 2005).

According to the World Health Organization’s Commission on Social Determinants of Health, health inequities are the result of policy failures (WHO, 2012). An effective policy to tackle health inequity must address the underlying social conditions that make disadvantaged people more vulnerable (Marmot, 2005). Without an effective action on the social determinants of health, many countries will neither meet the Millennium Development Goals (Millennium Project, 2006), nor can they attain the global targets for reducing chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes (Strong, Mathers, Leeder, & Beaglehode, 2005). Efforts to improve health equity can be reduced by incorporating a SDH approach with the exiting approaches (Satcher, 2010).

Adopting this approach will require a substantial increase in number of scientists with the necessary skills. This local capacity (enough people to do the job) is required for research on SDH, promotion of multidisciplinary research, and dissemination of research findings to guide policymaking (WHO, 2004).