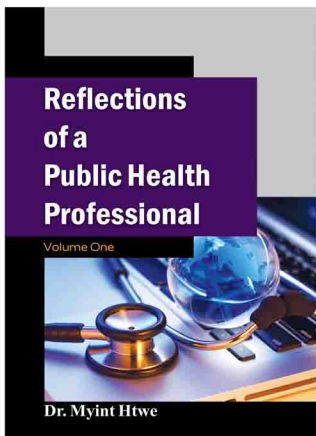


Formulation-Reformulation of National Health Research Policies and Strategies



Dr Myint Htwe

6. Formulation/reformulation of national health research policy and strategies

(This article is based on the technical discourse at the Department of Medical Research (Lower Myanmar), December 2010).

The ultimate purpose of formulation/reformulation of National Health Research Policy (NHRP) is to get a policy which reflects the following characteristics:

- 1. NHRP will be complementary to and also supportive of National Health Policy and strategies.*
- 2. Many aspects of NHRP will have strong linkages with National Health Plan and its implementation.*
- 3. NHRP will have either direct or indirect links with policy and strategies of health-related ministries in the country.*
- 4. NHRP will be evidence-based so that scarce resources are utilized to the fullest extent in translating policy into action.*
- 5. Research strategies and activities emerging out of NHRP will be able to support the activities of the Ministry of Health (MoH) in tackling health challenges of the country.*
- 6. NHRP will be forward-looking, responsive, dynamic and broad enough to cater to the contemporary and future needs of the country in areas of health promotion, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.*

Advantages of having a sound NHRP

The following advantages are likely to be achieved if we have a sound and rational NHRP:

- The activities of research organizations and institutions (Department of Medical Research) are consistent, less duplicated, less fragmented, fully*

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justified, cost effective, cost efficient and really beneficial to the country.

- *It is easier for research organizations and institutions (Department of Medical Research) to deal with relevant UN organizations, funding agencies and other international research organizations for collaborative research activities.*
- *Strong National Health Research Framework can be developed which can move the research agenda with clear-cut direction.*
- *This framework could be used and referred to in teaching students at the Universities of Medicine, Public Health, Community Health, Nursing and Medical Technology, Pharmacy, etc. A research culture could be ingrained in the minds of future health workers. This could have long-term beneficial effects for the country.*

What is health research policy?

- Simply put, “A health research policy is a set of principles guiding decision making”. It provides a framework against which research strategies, interventions, and activities are developed.
- The basic principles of formulating / reformulating NHRP are similar to formulating / reformulating the health policy.

Generic cycle of policy making and policy process

Policy making is a *continuous interactive process with a cyclical structure or nature*. Several *cyclical models* are available. The basic cycle is (i) problem identification and issue recognition; (ii) policy formulation; (iii) policy implementation; and (iv) policy evaluation. Duration of the cyclical process may vary from country to country. A policy becomes strong, relevant and useful if this cyclical process is observed by an institution.

Mechanism to formulate/reformulate NHRP

- *A legitimate body to initiate the process is required.*
- *An appropriate advisory group and functional technical core group or task force to do the actual work should be formed. Sub-groups could be formed as required.*
- *Conduct forums with broad participation to review the findings of “research scenario analysis”. Each forum must have specific objectives and expected output. Members of the forum must be proactive, professional in discussion and technically strong. Full administrative and secretarial support is essential.*
- *A dynamic and pragmatic prioritization process is important in order to identify key problem areas, disciplines, and domains. The selection of domains or areas of research should be jointly identified by the research managers, researchers and the service department professionals (Departments of Public Health, Medical Services, Traditional Medicine, and Human Resource for Health and faculty members of concerned teaching institutions.*
- *Identification of policy options and its implications (social, economic, political,cultural, etc.) must be thoroughly discussed.*
- *A national health research convention involving all players must be conducted to discuss various policy options identified by the functional technical core group and agreed upon by the advisory group.*
- *Separate debate or brainstorming sessions may be required for controversial issues emanating throughout the formulation/reformulation process.*

The final draft should be submitted to higher authorities as per the country's established procedure. The following issues should be discussed as appropriate in the process or after the process of formulation/reformulation. The information emanating from it may also facilitate formulation/reformulation of NHRP. This could also be used in the translation of NHRP into action:

1. *Development of tools and indicators, such as effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness, applicability, relevancy, adequacy, equity, feasibility, etc., for assessing the progress of implementation of NHRP should be considered;*
2. *An efficient administrative and management system should be outlined to steer the policy in the right direction;*
3. *A system for "Responsible Conduct of Research" (RCR) should be developed;*
4. *A phase-wise action plan to translate NHRP into action should be drawn up involving all collaborating partners up to utilization of research findings;*
5. *An action plan for capacity building of young researchers together with analysis of current human resource for research should be drawn;*
6. *Doable action plan for improving "Research Management" and coordination of research institutions should be drawn;*
7. *Development of a "Resource Mobilization Strategy" for the research institution (resource allocation in health research is an investment and not an expenditure) should be considered;*
8. *Action plan for streamlining research information system in the country should be considered;*
9. *Development of quick checklists to assess the performance of a unit or division or department of a research institution;*

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- 10. Quick analysis of current utilization pattern of budget/ funding for research; and*
- 11. Ethical standards in research.*

Contents of NHRP statement

The *inherent purpose* of NHRP is to consider future (long-term) health scenarios and related research needs as well as to solve the existing main health problems (short-term). The format of NHRP statements may vary from country to country. (Samples of National Health Research Policy of Nepal and India are distributed as references).

Specific policy guidelines related to the following issues may be incorporated in the policy as policy statements:

- 1. Overall research themes related to broad programme areas aimed at achieving a health target within a specified time frame;*
- 2. Specific priority research areas together with specific priority research topics or a national health research plan;*
- 3. Knowledge generation and knowledge management;*
- 4. Resource allocation vis-à-vis basic research, clinical research, health systems research, implementation research, etc.;*
- 5. Human resource for research development and deployment, including career structures;*
- 6. Reward and recognition for research;*
- 7. Strengthening the capacity of research institutions and establishment of new institutions;*
- 8. Legislative and ethical requirements for research;*
- 9. Procedures for ensuring the evaluation of research findings and their appropriate use in health development;*

10. *Informing the public of relevant research outcomes and initiating public debates on pertinent issues;*
11. *Modalities for exploring internal and external funding for priority research areas;*
12. *Collaboration or networking with internal and external partners (international research centres, research foundations, and relevant UN organizations) for research development;*
13. *Multidisciplinary (social, behavioural and health economics sciences), multi-sectoral, community-based organizations and private sector linkages (pharmaceutical industries) (so that these will be properly reflected in the research framework and strategies); and*
14. *How will research culture be nurtured?*

Conclusion

- *We need concerted and coordinated efforts to consider carrying out some of the points mentioned above in a phased or step-by-step manner;*
- *While considering the discussion points mentioned above, systems approach, systems thinking and epidemiologic thinking should be applied;*
- *The research professionals of Department of Medical Research are, no doubt, key players. However, other relevant players need to be primed and properly informed so that they are involved in improving the health research domain in the country;*
- *We need to promote healthy public policies through a strong National Health Research Policy; and*
- *The role of the University of Public Health, Preventive and Social Medicine Society of Myanmar Medical Association, University of Medicine, University of Community Health, University of Nursing, University of*

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Medical Technology and training schools or institutions in the country are also very crucial as partners. Their inputs are essential.

(NB. Research and Health Research are used interchangeably. NHRP and National Health Research Policy and Strategies are used interchangeably)

Further reading

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(NB. Items number 6, 7, 8, & 9 were prepared by Dr. Myint Htwe, then Regional Adviser on Medical Research, (1994 to 2000), WHO-SEARO)