Evaluations of health research capacity strengthening: a review of the evidence

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Summary

• Although there has been significant investment in strengthening research capacity in low or middle income countries (LMICs) little is known about how to measure the effectiveness of this investment
• We reviewed publications about health research capacity strengthening (HRCS) programmes to understand how authors had evaluated effectiveness
• 593 publications described evaluations of HRCS projects; only 4 (0.7%) were primary studies from LMICs
• Despite the close link between research and improvements in health, there are very few high quality, detailed evaluations of capacity strengthening projects in LMICs

Introduction

• Capacity strengthening efforts are often incorporated into projects and both funders and recipients need evidence of the effectiveness of these efforts
• We reviewed published literature to synthesize information about the design, setting, type, measurement indicators and impact of HRCS projects in LMICs

Methods

• We searched 9 databases (to March 2010) using 22 search terms to identify papers that focused on HRCS
• We used a broad definition of HRCS (e.g. courses, mentoring, collaborations, networks)
• We analysed studies describing primary data collected in LMICs, divided into a) ‘one-off’ cross-sectional assessments and b) ‘before’ and ‘after’ evaluations of an intervention.
• Data was double-extracted and entered onto a pre-piloted form based on published frameworks
• Study quality was assessed using a published checklist

Results

• 593 publications focussed on HRCS; (31 (5.0%) were primary studies, 13 (2.2%) were from LMICs (figure).
• Only 4 (0.7%) studies from Ghana (2), Vietnam and Pakistan met our criteria for a primary study in LMICs that evaluated a HRCS intervention
• Quality of the 4 studies was variable. All specified objectives and outcome measures, and stressed the importance of engaging senior managers in developing research capacity. None had a comparator group; two were retrospective and two used validated tools

Discussion

• Published literature on HRCS is dominated by recounting of programs and experiences with little published evaluation.
• Much more rigorous and substantial evidence is needed to inform robust evaluations of effectiveness of HRCS efforts

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