

Pan American Health Organization

PAHO/ACMR 14/11
Original: English

FOURTEENTH MEETING OF THE
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL RESEARCH

Washington, D.C.
7-10 July 1975

NOTE ON THE FUNCTION AND WORKING OF THE
PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL RESEARCH

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Note on the Function and Working of the
PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL RESEARCH

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May 1975

The Advisory Committee on Medical Research (ACMR) has on several occasions examined and criticized its own activities, notably in 1970 and 1971. The relevant passages of the reports of those years to the Director are reproduced in Appendixes 1 and 2.

It has again been suggested that the ACMR is not fulfilling its proper role. The main tenor of the criticisms is that the Committee is too passive; its agenda is drawn up by the Secretariat, and it receives reports on activities that have already been undertaken. It fails to take the initiative, and to produce a strategy for the planning of future research.

Are these criticisms justified, and if they are, can anything be done about it?

The activities of the Committee may be divided broadly into two categories:

A. The ACMR has over the years received reports on a very large number of research programs and activities covering a wide range of disciplines. In each case it is open to the Committee to make an explicit judgment on the strength or weakness of the work. Often it has not in fact expressed a very positive opinion. One reason for this may be that it is difficult to do this in the presence of those presenting the work. (Note that in 1971 it was suggested that there should be closed executive sessions.)

Another reason perhaps is that when the ACMR is under-strength it may not have enough expertise to make a judgment in some fields.

Further, the Committee has before it the reports (Research in Progress) prepared by the Secretariat summarizing PAHO's research program.

The program was reviewed by the Committee in 1965, 1966, 1968, and at some length in 1971. There was no further review until 1974. These reviews have therefore been intermittent, and in making them the ACMR has never made any attempt to assess priorities.

B. In addition to what might be called retrospective reviews of existing programs, the ACMR has concerned itself very actively with long-range aspects of health research in Latin America. It has done this through three mechanisms:

- (1) It has requested the Director to commission reports by consultants on subjects of general importance, such as the migration of health scientists and the present state of biomedical research in Latin America.
- (2) It has itself initiated discussions on the organization of research, and the experience of various bodies which support research in developing countries, e.g., symposia in 1972 and 1973 (Appendix 3).
- (3) It has organized every year a special session on a particular topic, with the aim of stimulating ideas about the directions in which research might or should develop. These sessions are listed in Appendix 3.

It must, perhaps, be admitted that these activities have not borne immediate fruit. The reports and discussions under (1) and (2) above have covered such a wide area that they have not led to concrete and specific recommendations. The special sessions have varied in quality. Many of them have been valuable contributions from a scientific point of

view and have produced excellent publications. They have, no doubt, alerted PAHO to areas of future concern, but they have probably not made much contribution to PAHO's immediate research strategy.

It is evident that potentially the ACMR has two quite different functions. One is to act as a review body, carrying out activities of the kind described in A above. The other is to act as a planning body, advising on priorities, strategy, and future activities. Perhaps this is an appropriate time for PAHO to review the terms of reference of the ACMR, and to decide on the emphasis which it wishes to attach to these two functions.

Whatever the terms of reference, the ability of the ACMR to make a more positive contribution depends upon two things: the structure and organization of the Committee, and the extent to which members are prepared to be active.

In my experience the effectiveness of any committee depends to a considerable extent on the initiative of the Chairman. The ACMR is unusual in that it does not have a continuing chairman appointed for a definite term. In the 5 years in which I have been chairman, I have been asked to take this position at the opening of each meeting. My function has therefore been to conduct the meeting and, with the help of the rapporteurs, to produce a report. Between meetings my position has been the same as that of any other member of the Committee. Members may wish to consider whether it would increase the effectiveness of the Committee if a chairman were appointed for a definite period, with continuing responsibility between meetings.

Similarly, the members of the ACMR have not been appointed for any fixed term. This point was discussed in 1971, but no definite recommendation was made.

The effectiveness of the Committee obviously depends as much on the members as on the chairman. In recent years there have been many sessions at which fewer than half the members were present. No committee which meets only once a year can operate well under such conditions. In 1970 there was discussion about appointing alternates, who would attend when members themselves were unable to do so. Again, no decision was reached.

The purpose of this note is to provide some background for a discussion. I should like to end with a few points for consideration by the Committee:

- (1) Should PAHO be asked to redefine our function and terms of reference? What emphasis does the ACMR itself think should be given to the two roles of reviewing and planning?
- (2) The Committee may wish to look again at the recommendations of 1970. On the whole nothing came of them, and it is worth considering why this was so.
- (3) There are many ways, some of them suggested in the 1970 report, by which members could improve the effectiveness of the Committee if they are prepared to devote time and effort to it between meetings. Is this an obligation which all members should undertake, and is it a practical proposition?
- (4) In my view it would be useful to have a short closed session at the end of each meeting, at which all the matters which came up could be freely and frankly discussed.
- (5) A possible approach for the next few years might be for members of the Committee to be designated to review fields of PAHO's activity in which they have special expertise. Two or three such reviews might be prepared each year, and a day devoted to discussing them, perhaps in place of the special session.

A member of the ACMR making such a review would in effect be acting as a PAHO consultant, and it is debatable whether members have the time for this. Moreover, this still does not solve the problem of how to examine the balance and priorities of the program as a whole.

Appendix I

REVIEW OF THE FUNCTIONS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE PAHO/ACMR 1970 Report to the Director

Pursuant to a decision of last year's meeting, consultations were held during the early months of 1970 with the Director, the Secretariat, and the individual members of the ACMR for the purpose of examining the the past and future work of the Committee. Questions were addressed specifically to the role of research in the long-range plans of PAHO and to the appropriate functions of the Committee in the implementation of the research program over time. A report of these discussions was presented by the consultants who undertook to assist the ACMR in this task.

The Committee began its discussion of the subject by expressing appreciation to the Director for the support he has given to its work and also to the consultants for their effective efforts in collecting the background information.

Attention was called to a series of specific observations. The hope was voiced that the Director would take cognizance of as many of them as are consistent with the priorities and general plans of the Organization. The suggestions were as follows:

- The PAHO research program should place greater emphasis on research directly related to major health problems and causes of death and illness in the Americas. Its support of basic research should be mainly for lines of investigation derived from practical problems. Nutrition, infectious diseases (Chagas' disease, virus and bacterial diseases), population problems, environmental hazards, and infant diarrhea were among the areas considered important.
- In regard to health problems of major concern, the ACMR should consider what additional kinds of research--biological, epidemiological, social, and administrative--are necessary to improve or extend control programs.

- PAHO and the Committee together should select a limited number of important practical problems for intensive study and should examine the desirability of devoting special sessions of the ACMR to such questions.
- The Committee should concern itself more actively with the assessment in depth of research in progress.
- The work of the Committee should encompass the review of investigations relating to environmental hazards and the administration of health care as well as research in the fields of biology and medicine.
- The Committee should continue its discussions of the general strategy and program priorities of PAHO so that its advice will be consistent with the general goals of the Organization. The review of the objectives and accomplishments of the PAHO research program in the past decade should be completed for presentation at the 1971 meeting of the ACMR as a basis for planning the Committee's activities for the next five years.

The Director supplemented these suggestions by proposing that the Committee undertake as one of its most important tasks the consideration of ways and means of assisting the Organization in the preparation of a long-range research program. In addition, he urged that the Committee assume an active role in the planning and implementation of research education.

Turning next to the structure and method of work of the ACMR, the group recommended the following specific changes:

- Extension of the effectiveness of the Committee by involving a larger number of active research workers in its tasks. A broader range of professional backgrounds and wide participation by younger investigators would be helpful in this respect. To this effect, consideration might be given to reducing the average length of service on the Committee and/or to establishing subcommittees to be chaired by a member of the ACMR.
- The convening of more than one meeting a year, with some of them to be held in Latin America.
- Development of a closer working relationship between the Secretariat and the Committee, perhaps by involving the Secretariat with the work of subcommittees.

-Establishment of the chairmanship as a continuing responsibility, with closer links with the Secretariat and perhaps the involvement of some additional staff for the Department of Research Development and Coordination.

Appendix 2

ROLE OF THE ACMR
1971 Report to the Director

Attendance

Frequently members of the Committee find it impossible to attend the meetings of the ACMR. As a consequence, their absence deprives the Committee of the benefit of their competence and experience in certain fields and may alter the geographical distribution of members, thereby reducing the usefulness of the Committee to the Organization.

It was felt that attendance might improve if members were advised of their participation in meetings of the ACMR as far as in advance as possible. Furthermore, members should be asked to state definitely whether or not they will be able to attend.

Frequency of Meetings

On previous occasions the Committee had expressed itself in favor of more than one meeting a year, with some of them to be held in Latin America. Although conscious of the financial implications of the suggestion, the Committee wished to reaffirm it, trusting that the Director will find it possible to implement the recommendation.

Length of Meeting

There was some discussion about length of the meetings. Shorter meetings might improve attendance. However, the view prevailed that there is ample material for a full meeting and that five days is not too long.

Briefing

Suggestions were made for briefing speakers so that they fully understood the purpose of their presentations, thus allowing better opportunities for discussion.

Term of Office

The Committee discussed the possible advantages of limiting the term of members to a definite period, such as three years, without opportunity for immediate renewal. Negative aspects of such a practice were evident. It was agreed, therefore, to suggest that the Director give consideration to this proposal without, however, giving it the character of a recommendation.

Executive Sessions

In order to be entirely free to advise the Director on particular aspects of the research program, the Committee would appreciate the opportunity of meeting in executive session at least twice in the course of general meetings.

Title Change

The suggestion was made that the title of the Committee would better reflect the actual interest of the Organization in biomedical, epidemiological, administrative, and social science research, if it were changed to "Advisory Committee on Health Research." The Committee did not wish to make a recommendation on this suggestion at this time, however.

Expansion of Activity

Several times in the past the Committee has emphasized the advantages of extending its effectiveness by becoming involved in a larger number of research activities. To this effect it has encouraged the participation

of members of the ACMR in appropriate PAHO subcommittees. They could also profitably visit research projects and study the evolution of progress in the field, reporting their findings and conclusions to the Committee. The Committee reaffirmed this recommendation.

The Committee is aware of all the limitations in resources available to the Director, and that he will have to determine the practicability of adopting any of its recommendations and suggestions.

Appendix 3

SPECIAL SESSIONS AND SYMPOSIA HELD IN CONJUNCTION WITH MEETINGS OF THE ACMR
OR INDEPENDENTLY FROM THEM, AND CORRESPONDING SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATIONS

Year	Title	PAHO Sci. Pub. Number
1975	International Symposium on New Approaches in American Trypanosomiasis Research in Brazil	----
1974	Third International Conference on the Mycoses, São Paulo	304
1974	International Symposium on Research and Control of Onchocerciasis in the Western Hemisphere	298
1974	*Health Research in Latin America	275
1973	*Medical Auxiliaries	278
1972	The Control of Lice and Louse-Borne Diseases	263
1972	*Epidemiologic Studies and Clinical Trials in Chronic Diseases	257
1972	Nutrition, the Nervous System, and Behavior	251
1971	Paracoccidioidomycosis	254
1971	Venezuelan Encephalitis	243
1971	*Systems Analysis Applied to Health Services	239
1971	*Vector Control and the Recrudescence of Vector-Borne Diseases	238
1970	International Conference on the Application of Vaccines Against Viral, Rickettsial, and Bacterial Diseases of Man	226
1970	*Metabolic Adaptation and Nutrition	222
1970	International Symposium on Mycoses	205

1969	*Perinatal Factors Affecting Human Development	185
1969	*Iron Metabolism and Anemia	184
1969	Argentine Hemorrhagic Fever: Current Knowledge	183
1969	Health in the World of Tomorrow	175
1968	*Biomedical Challenges Presented by the American Indian	165
1967	The Unreasonable Man	152
1967	*Immunologic Aspects of Parasitic Infections	150
1967	First International Conference on Vaccines Against Viral and Rickettsial Diseases of Man	147
1966	Migration of Health Personnel, Scientists, and Engineers from Latin America	142
1966	*Life at High Altitudes	140
1966	Man and His Environment	131
1965	*Deprivation in Psychobiological Development	134
1965	*Science Policy in Latin America: Substance, Structures, and Processes	119
1964	*Environmental Determinants of Community Well Being	123