

The Global Health Network

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What is The Global Health Network?

The Global Health Network is accelerating and streamlining research in low-and-middle-income countries through an innovative digital platform, which facilitates collaboration and resource sharing across different disease areas. It is an online science park where researchers are working together without geographical, institutional or financial barriers. The result is a productive, interactive environment where research teams access peers, generate research documents, acquire technical expertise and develop new protocols in open collaboration to hasten and improve their, and importantly others, research outputs and research capacity.

Why is it needed?

Health research involves lengthy processes and escalating costs resulting in too few studies in the world's poorest regions and there is a drastic lack of data from situations such as novel disease outbreaks simply because it takes too long to set up new studies. Furthermore, there is little evidence to drive improvements in practice in many regions and diseases due to the shortage of skills and local ability to engage in data capture. In research there are many commonalities in the process and design of studies, yet as scientists we work in closed silos and rarely share how we do our work. Preventing duplication in solving similar issues and sharing methodologies would reduce costs, raise quality and standards in research and speed up the acquisition of life-changing evidence. It would also increase equity in access to the benefits of research across the globe. In addition, those funding research are paying many times over for their grantees to duplicate steps and solve problems that others have already addressed.

What has been achieved?

Since 2011 the network has been accessed over 200,000 times and between 7,000 and 8,000 researchers and research staff from areas such as India, China, Africa, Asia and South America use the platform every month. Over 10,000 online courses have been taken and 23 research groups are located on the platform. The Global Health Network has become renowned as a valuable and trusted resource for those working in global health research. Impact evaluation is embedded and strong quantitative and qualitative data show how research teams are gaining capacity to engage in research and that their research is being enhanced.

What next?

The five-year strategic plan for The Global Health Network has three key elements. Firstly strengthening and developing research tools with new resources for data management, setting up studies, laboratory system and a directory of research laboratories, for example. This goal also encompasses a comprehensive expansion of the highly successful research skills training that is offered. The second area in the strategic plan is to scale up application of cutting edge digital technology. Here the intention is to enable data storage and sharing for researchers in these regions, offering high quality managed access solutions. Another key element in this second goal is the presentation of personalised information to users of the network. This would offer relevant resources and also make sure the support they seek can be readily accessed, in the same way that online shopping organisations do this. Lastly, we aim to increase our regional activities. We have shown that local research capacity development initiatives enable the wider engagement with other resources and wider groups within the network, whilst creating impact locally. For example we have facilitated 13 research skills-sharing workshops in Africa and Asia. These are immensely popular and impactful because they bring together academic, industrial and health organisation research staff who would never otherwise meet and share their methods. They all tackle the same issues and can improve what they do by learning from each other. In addition, these workshops lead to a higher level of engagement with The Global Health Network and so these researchers benefit even further from accessing the wider tools and finding collaborators in further places. We have workshops planned this year in Zambia, Peru, and Honduras.

In summary, The Global Health Network is a thriving community of practice where researchers are sharing their research tools, knowledge and experience online and face-to-face in the regions. The concept is simple: applying digital technology to allow groups to exchange best practice between disease areas, regions and research organisations. The principal is proven and this is now poised to dramatically scale-up to enable more and better research in the world's poorest regions.