EDITORIAL

Public Health Action: a new home for operational research

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This month sees the appearance of the new scientific journal, *Public Health Action*. Is there a need for such a journal? What does it bring to a field where many other journals already publish new knowledge? The journal has been launched by the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union) for the purpose of encouraging critical thinking directed to improving the quality of health services and systems for the poor. When we consider the burden of disease the poor suffer, we must conclude that relieving this burden is not primarily in knowing *what* to do, but rather in knowing *how* to do it. If we took the knowledge we already have and applied it in a feasible, sustainable, efficient and appropriate manner, we would go a long way to addressing the goal The Union has set for itself, namely 'Health solutions for the poor'. This is what operational research is about.

What is the specific focus of the new journal? It welcomes submissions that provide new knowledge concerning health services and systems for the poor so that action can be taken to improve these services and systems and to reduce their burden of disease. The articles in this first issue of PHA illustrate this very well: they report operational research from health services in Malawi,¹⁻³ Pakistan,⁴ Ethiopia⁵ and South Africa.⁶ The publications focus on services in the public sector as well as humanitarian projects addressing tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, malnutrition and malaria. The articles illustrate exactly what PHA is aiming to address, i.e., those conditions that are prevalent among the poor and that pose risks to life and health. Moreover, the focus of these manuscripts is on the practical work of those caring for such patients and clients, from services and systems for diagnosis, to treatment and to management of health information.

When I mentioned to a respected colleague who specializes in clinical trials that we were planning to

launch a new journal focused on operational research, he posed the question, 'Is that really scientific research?' Such a question is neither rare nor surprising. The place of operational research in the canon of science is far from generally recognized and it needs to be defended. The series of articles published in this issue demonstrate the scientific nature of operational research. They use rigorous scientific methods, generally address hypotheses, make comparisons, employ statistical analysis, draw conclusions that have relevance for the services and systems they are studying and provide new knowledge from which action can be taken to improve these services and systems.

Public Health Action is here, it is freely accessible and it welcomes reports of research of the type illustrated in this issue. We hope that the new knowledge it publishes will provide the 'Health solutions for the poor' that is the reason The Union launched this journal.

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