

Building a Stronger Medical Research Institute in Tanzania

Prominent health research organizations in many developing countries have focused little on family planning and the skills needed to link evidence to family planning programs. Through PROGRESS, FHI 360 has sought to expand such capacity through multiple activities in Tanzania.

At the invitation of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MOHSW), in early 2010 PROGRESS began a three-year effort to work with the Muhimbili Medical Research Centre of the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR). A prestigious institute operating under the MOHSW, NIMR has successfully conducted and promoted medical research to alleviate disease among the people of Tanzania for more than 30 years. The institute has a large pool of well trained scientists and data managers, a history of collaboration on large research studies, and some experience using research results to improve policies and practices in the country, especially in the area of maternal and newborn deaths.

PROGRESS has worked with the institute to build its capacity to

generate practical evidence-based solutions to advance family planning policies and practices in Tanzania as well. This work has included expanding the educational opportunities of NIMR's staff, providing opportunities for practical research experience, and developing a mentoring system.

Expanding Educational Opportunities

One of the most direct ways to build research capacity is to offer educational seminars on different aspects of the research process. Since April 2010, FHI 360 and local partners in Tanzania have provided four such seminars for NIMR staff and other interested parties, including those from the Muhimbili School of Public Health and Social Sciences and from the Reproductive and Child Health Section (RCHS) of the MOHSW.

The first of the four seminars focused on research utilization, particularly the approaches that can be used before, during, and after research to increase the likelihood that research results will be used to improve family planning services.

The second seminar focused on participatory research techniques, or finding ways to include a variety of stakeholders in the research process so that the research will adequately address local issues and concerns. The third and fourth seminars, respectively, were on writing scientific manuscripts and on analyzing and managing data.

A seminar on operations research was conducted in February 2012, and additional seminars are being planned on qualitative research methods and grant writing. Opportunities are also being sought for NIMR to apply for grants to conduct its own family planning research in Tanzania. Most recently, NIMR submitted a research proposal to Marie Stopes Tanzania to conduct a baseline survey on family planning use in the country.

Gaining Practical Research Experience

As NIMR is expanding its research portfolio by applying for family planning research grants, the partnership between FHI 360 and NIMR is also providing opportunities for the institute to gain practical



experience conducting this type of research. Staff members from NIMR are shadowing FHI 360 scientists on a variety of family planning studies and, in three cases, have acted as co-investigators on the studies.

Acting as a co-investigator allows a researcher to gain experience in all aspects of the research process, from designing the study and analyzing the data to writing reports and publishing the findings. One researcher from NIMR was a co-investigator on a recent FHI 360 study to determine if women can effectively self-screen for contraindications to hormonal contraceptive methods. The study is now complete, and the NIMR researcher is helping finalize the data for eventual publication.

Based on the study's positive preliminary results, which have been shared with stakeholders in Tanzania and were presented at the 2011 International Conference on Family Planning in Dakar, NIMR is also writing a formal request to the Tanzania Food and Drugs Authority to allow drugs shops to sell injectable contraceptives.

Establishing a Mentorship Program

A formal mentoring program has also been established to foster knowledge, interest, and skills in family planning research among the

junior researchers at NIMR. Each of three junior researchers has been matched with a primary mentor and several technical advisors at FHI 360, with whom the researcher will work for about two days a week for one year.

One of the junior researchers is paired with a health economist at FHI 360, working on a project to support the MOHSW in developing and implementing a National Family Planning Costed Implementation Program to boost contraceptive prevalence in Tanzania. Through the mentoring program, this mentee is learning how to prepare, collect, analyze, and disseminate information generated from family planning research, and he is learning how the results of family planning research can be used at the policy level.

In addition to the separate projects they are working on, the three mentees together have applied for and been awarded a small family planning and reproductive health grant from the MEASURE Evaluation Population and Reproductive Health Project. With technical assistance from FHI 360, the mentees plan to evaluate what effect integrating family planning into HIV care and treatment centers has on the quality of family planning services in 12 public centers in Tanzania.

Creating Demand for Family Planning Research

Educational seminars, opportunities for NIMR staff to be investigators on family planning studies, and the mentorship program are all helping create capable family planning researchers within NIMR. But also important to the success and sustainability of future research efforts is knowing that stakeholders outside of the institute—especially the MOHSW—support the research that NIMR is doing.

Toward this goal, FHI 360 is helping to facilitate important linkages between NIMR and the RCHS. The relationship between the two groups should be mutually beneficial since NIMR is bringing its strong research experience to the relationship and the RCHS is bringing its deep understanding of the issues facing family planning in Tanzania today.

In March 2011, NIMR was approved as a member of the National Family Planning Technical Working Group. As part of this role, NIMR is working alongside the RCHS to develop a national family planning research agenda for Tanzania. Once the agenda is complete, NIMR will help disseminate it to local research organizations to promote research on the most pressing family planning questions in the country.