Developing research and innovation capacity
Working together is vital for innovation, country experiences show

Four experts from different countries with a mix of experiences in implementing innovations in health research shared a common position: research and innovation are important building blocks that need to be harmonized by various sectors. In a forum moderated by Dr. Manuel Dayrit, dean of the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health and former Health Secretary of the Philippines, experts agreed that there should be a convergence of actions to push health research forward to result in innovation.

“All sectors must work together, not just government, academia, civil society, and others,” concluded Dr. Dayrit. “And we have to find out-of-the-box solutions—create a space where all of these things need to happen.”

In Brazil, for example, Dr. Fabio Zicker, senior visiting professor from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, shared that major problems in health care, technology innovation, and architecture in the national system hampered the course of innovations in the health sector. To address the problem, Brazil took several steps, including fostering cooperation and concerted work of four ministries, government agencies, implementers, and funding agencies, including 64 universities and more than 250 medical schools.

This convergence resulted in several actions that drastically improved Brazil’s health system. Among the solutions implemented were the creation of networks for chronic diseases and health technology assessments, public-private partnership, national research agenda, and support systems for health research. Dr. Dayrit observed that Brazil’s solution involved a strong connection between the academia and innovation.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, the drug discovery project for malaria started with only one strategy at the University of Cape Town with only two people at the helm, as shared by Dr. Glaudina Loots, director of health innovation at the South African Department of Science and Technology. Loots noted that after six years, the project expanded to involve five institutions, with 100% funding coming from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), and one identified clinical trial candidate.

With its drug discovery project for TB, the scenario has drastically changed. The project is now multidisciplinary involving a groundbreaking partnership between seven pharmaceutical companies and six research institutions, with 100% funding match still from BMGF. South Africa’s TB drug discovery project is, in fact, one of the largest in the world, giving the country a major global leadership role and the opportunity to develop major collaborations with global partners.

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New Leaders for Health PreForum
Be a renaissance person – new leaders for health told

“Be a renaissance person and make a difference in whatever you choose to do; but do this for others, and not for yourself.” So said Dr. Nina Castillo-Carandang, associate professor at UP Manila’s Department of Clinical Epidemiology, during one of the sessions of “New Leaders for Health PreForum” conducted before the formal launch of the 2015 Global Forum on Research and Innovation for Health.

The Pre-Forum served as a convergence point for new and emerging leaders in health research, innovation, education, advocacy, and policy from 70 countries. Entitled “Increasing the Effectiveness of Research and Innovation for Health through Social Accountability,” the session tackled the urgency and effect of research and innovation for health.

The session pointed out the pitfalls of health information delivery and decision making. These include the limited number of venues in which issues may be discussed with the people and the focus given on decision makers, academe, private sector, and big institutions rather than the general public.

Aside from Social Accountability, other topics were tackled at the Pre-Forum including Digital Healthcare, Role of Healthcare in Addressing Climate-Energy-Health Nexus, Increasing Investments, Qualitative Methods for Health Research, Publishing Your First Journal Article, Role of Nurses in Global Health Research and Innovation, and Designing Strategic Communications for Health Advocacy, among others.

The event served as an avenue for the new health leaders to discuss issues, gain updates, participate in capacity building activities, and create networks for future partnerships on health initiatives.

Dr. Samuel D. Bernal
Quintessential Filipino Scientist Calls for Genuine Innovation

Famed Filipino personality Dr. Samuel D. Bernal, whose name has become a byword in the fields of Medicine and Science, Law, Business, and Communications, is optimistic about the Philippines making headway in research for health in the next few years, but stresses the need for genuine innovation to arise from such efforts. Dr. Bernal was among the presentors in the session on Leveraging Partnerships, joining forces: Global-local, public-private, industry-academe on Tuesday, and will be giving another presentation in the forum on Enhancing infrastructure for research and innovation for health II – universities, basic science facilities, research centers, and more.

He explained further that true innovation means the development of something actually new that constitutes a breakthrough or quantum leap, rather than just repeating what has already been done, neither is it merely improving or enhancing existing technology or ideas, and not even integrating existing technology to develop something that only seems different. He pointed out that such developments are long overdue in the Philippines, considering the great potential the nation has in various fields that can contribute to health.

Being an American citizen and a truly global resident with offices in the Czech Republic, Latvia, Los Angeles, and Manila, Dr. Bernal shares his observations on what may be obstructing the Filipino researchers from forging far ahead in innovation as other Asian countries have. The Filipinos, he noted, are too closely affiliated with Americans, and feels comfortable with being able to rely on the U.S. in many aspects of life, including healthcare. “Other Asian countries feel like they are on their own, so they need to develop their own solutions.”

In the late 1980s, Dr. Bernal was tasked by the Philippine Department of Health to put up a special unit that would provide impetus to advanced health sciences, specifically in biotechnology. This initiative transferred to the private sector, and is now operative in the Medical City hospital as the Institute of Personalized Molecular Medicine, at which he continues to serve as consultant and adviser. He decries the setbacks caused by the tendency of succeeding government administrations to discontinue or ignore good things accomplished by their predecessors, thereby making private ownership of such efforts necessary.

Dr. Bernal is currently Chairman of the International Institute of Law and Medicine based in Salzburg, President of the Science and Technology Action Network for Development based in Prague, and legal counsel and co-founder of the Global Filipino Diaspora in Los Angeles, California.

According to Dr. Carandang, access to health information should first and foremost be simple and understood by everyone; and politicans should always have an agenda for health.

Information is a core element of social accountability, stressed Dr. Dennis Batangan, research associate from the Institute of Philippine Culture of Ateneo de Manila University. “In order to effectively influence health agenda setting, people should have access to information with regard to their health,” emphasized Batangan who also serves as chair of the Global Forum’s Social Accountability Thematic Track. “They should be invited to participate. All sectors should be involved in decision making,” he added.

The event served as an avenue for the new health leaders to discuss issues, gain updates, participate in capacity building activities, and create networks for future partnerships on health initiatives.
Focus on education right from the primary level, build institutions, and create partnerships to ensure successful research and development at country level. This was the take-home message of Dr. Charles Ok Pannenborg, Chair of Capacity Plus’s Global Advisory Board on Strengthening Medical, Nursing and Public Health Schools in the Opening Plenary Session of the Global Forum on Research and Innovation for Health (Forum 2015).

These lessons were drawn from the health research and development success stories in countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Brazil, Mexico, Kenya, China, Nigeria, Turkey, Jordan, India, Malaysia, and Egypt.

Dr. Pannenborg urged the creation of national academies of sciences for young bright scientists, establishment of technical universities, development of powerful research and science communities at the country level, and the encouragement of science communities to partner with industry, academe, and media.

Emphasizing that knowledge capital actually drives economic growth, he also cited the importance of investing structurally—to put real money in health research and development for long term. This can be done through subsidy and by using tax incentives. He added that we can also tap private funds for research as in the case of Singapore wherein for every dollar invested by the government, a counterpart amount of $2.7 is invested by private sector partners.

Dr. Pannenborg advocated greater investment in universities, but with focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). He noted that nations can also mobilize their cultural and religious leaders for research and innovation to help instil and permeate society with the value of science and research.

One important point that came across in the South African experience is the development of programs across the spectrum, not focused on the PhDs alone, but also on others such as laboratory technicians.

On her part, Dr. Pascale Allotey of Monash University in Malaysia stressed the three important “Is” to come up with innovations as the following: Individual, Institutions, and Intersections. “The starting point (of innovation) is always the individual,” she said. “However, after he gets a higher degree, for example, he no longer goes back to his institution because he has nothing to go back to.”

Building capacity in institutions is thus very vital, Dr. Allotey said. However, institution building in South Africa is somewhat hampered by several issues such as internal policies, and political, socio-cultural, and economic contexts.

But the good news is in the third “I”: intersections, particularly in the meeting together of policy, practice, and research. An example is South Africa’s professional doctorates. The state instituted locally and nationally defined research priorities, targeting of practitioners, and building of in-service opportunities for doctorates that made universities more relevant to communities.

The Philippine experience, shared by DOH Undersecretary Vicente Belizario Jr., is also rich with examples of institutions working together, such as the science and health departments and the Commission on Higher Education, all with mandates and programs that encourage health research and innovations. Such programs include University of the Philippines’ Balik PhD and Emerging Interdisciplinary Research Program; CHED’s faculty development program, thesis/dissertation assistance and grants, and Grants-in-Aid; the health department’s Research and Policy Capacity Building for Young Professionals; and the science department’s Balik Scientist Program, Best Mentor in Research Award, Gruppo Medica Award, and the Advanced Science and Technology Human Resources Development Program.