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February 7, 2014

Re: Senate Enquiry into Australia's Overseas Aid and Development Assistance Program

The Faculty of Medicine, Health and Molecular Sciences at James Cook University welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senate Enquiry into Australia's Overseas Aid and Development Assistance Program, particularly in regards to aid for health.

In light of the constrained national budget and the impact on Australia's Overseas Aid and Development Assistance Program, we believe there are a number of areas of Australia's aid that are important for supporting our regional interests and healthy futures.

Five key themes for the health are: health systems strengthening, education and training of the future health workforce, biosecurity, eliminating neglected tropical diseases, and a targeted and well considered research agenda that supports evidence based assessment of the impact of aid programs on health.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Ian Wronski
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Senate Enquiry into Australia's Overseas Aid and Development Assistance Program

Response from the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Molecular Sciences at James Cook University

In light of the constrained national budget and the impact on Australia's Overseas Aid and Development Assistance Program, we believe there are a number of areas of Australia's aid that are important for supporting our regional interests and healthy futures.

There are many major challenges facing the health of populations in our region. The impact of the overlap of infectious diseases with the surge in prevalence of chronic disease is occurring across the Asia Pacific zone. The health workforce required to meet the needs of the growing populations has yet to be fully considered from a policy perspective in the background of substantial demographic and economic shifts occurring. On the one hand, growing urbanisation and the emerging middle class provide opportunities for health system development. On the other hand, there are substantial challenges with the ageing population and access for health in rural areas. Australia has significant expertise in these areas that could be harnessed through strategic aid and development programs. The Australian and Queensland governments have recently established the Australian Institute of Tropical Health and Medicine to assist in understanding the nature, extent and potential responses to these issues. The overlap of infectious and chronic disease patterns (eg. tuberculosis with diabetes) combined with the uneven and inequitable distribution of health services and health workforce have begun to place significant demands on the health and economies of our region.

Five key themes for the health are: health systems strengthening, education and training of the future health workforce, biosecurity, eliminating neglected tropical diseases, and a targeted and well considered research agenda that supports evidence based assessment of the impact of aid programs on health.

Biosecurity

Northern Australia is significantly at risk of emerging and re-emerging diseases of the tropics. Dengue, malaria, Japanese encephalitis and multi-drug resistance tuberculosis are some of these diseases. Tuberculosis, essentially eradicated in Australia's mainland many decades ago, remains endemic (and potentially increasing) in Papua New Guinea. Routine cross border movement via the Torres Strait creates a substantial threat of re-establishment of tuberculosis in Australia, particularly in a population where a large proportion of people have diabetes.

Neglected Tropical Diseases

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) comprise a large cluster of infectious agents that cause significant global morbidity and mortality. For example, lymphatic filariasis (LF) causes physical deformity, stigma, and psychosocial problems, and is the second greatest cause of global disability after mental health, placing substantial burden on the economy of endemic regions. The NTDs have been comparatively ignored as targets for R&D and intervention. This situation is changing with increased recognition of their importance for global health, well-being and impact on economic development. Due to inadequate program implementation and limited evidence of effectiveness, there remain hotspots of high transmission within several countries in the Asia Pacific.

An opportunity exists for Australian leadership to contribute to the final global elimination of these historically important diseases through evidence informed policy and practice¹.

Health Systems Strengthening

It is estimated that there is a global shortage of 4.3 million health professionals². The availability of a qualified and comprehensive health workforce is one of the critical determinants of health access. Our regional health workforce is poorly prepared to meet the burgeoning needs of an ageing, and increasingly urbanising, population in the Asia Pacific. In addition, the large populations of rural poor often remain without access to health services. The scale of the health workforce need was recently recognised at the APEC Third High Level Meeting on Health and the Economy which ratified recommendations to;

- “Encourage the inclusion of universal health coverage in the post 2015 development agenda, including any unfinished Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agendas” and,
- “Work to ensure that economies’ health workforces are sufficient in size, well trained, adequately distributed, motivated and appropriately skilled to meet needs of the regions’ economies”⁴, with a specific focus on the allied health workforce³.

The rise of chronic disease from non-communicable disease (NCD) compounds the burden of NTDs in developing nations. While popular belief presumes that NCDs afflict mostly high-income populations, the evidence tells a different story. The total number of annual NCD deaths is projected to reach 55 million by 2030⁴. The workforce models to meet these needs has yet to be established, and provides Australia with a unique opportunity to lead health system development, informed by evidence from our experience.

Education and Training

Harmonising with the intent of the new Colombo Plan, Australia could play a substantial leadership role in the education and training of the Asia Pacific health workforce. High quality education and training has been a hallmark of Australia’s higher education and export industries. To date, the scale of demand for health services in the Asia Pacific economies has not been met. There is an emergent need for a workforce that is trained and relevant to deliver health services to the region. Australia is well placed to provide education and training services to build the capacity of health systems. Significant opportunities also exist to increase the mobility of Australian health professionals and students into the Asia Pacific, increasing our engagement in the health market into the coming decades.

Research

Critical to these challenges and opportunities is the capacity for high quality Australian-led research that can evaluate the impact of health programs. A complete separation of health research funding from aid and development programs is likely to be counterproductive. It will lead to an absence of requisite information around the characterisation of disease patterns (eg TB in PNG), the impact of interventions and the evaluation of aid and development programs. Australians with the expertise in research and the evaluation of the effectiveness of policy and interventions will be central to development of health systems in our region’s future.

References

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