

Trinidad and Tobago's Fifth National Annual Health Research Conference: Disseminating Indigenous Research Findings Toward Evidence-based Practices, Programmes and Policy

Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) hosted its first National Health Research Conference in 2020. Initially scheduled for March of that year, it was postponed to November due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, it has been held every November since then (1). The pandemic also meant that the planned face-to-face event in 2020 had to be pivoted to an online format. The Second Annual Conference was also hosted online in 2021 but since 2022 it has been face-to-face.

The primary objective of the National Health Research Conference (NHRC) is to disseminate the findings of indigenous research for use by policy makers, programme managers, care providers, researchers, students and civil society. This has been achieved and the Conference has been well supported with over 350 papers presented over the first four years and another 85 scheduled for 2024. Additionally, attendance continues to increase and was over-subscribed in 2023 with over 250 delegates. This is not insignificant, as the successful hosting of the Conference has undoubtedly contributed to the strengthening of the national health research culture. The presentation of papers and fielding of questions by both junior and senior researchers have resulted in capacity development of the former in a nurturing environment.

The Conference has also showcased research from an impressive range of disciplines that reflect the health issues confronting the country. Investigators have shared their findings on research on Infectious Diseases (including COVID-19), Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases, Mental Health and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Health Services, Clinical Studies, Laboratory Investigations, Oral Health, Veterinary Studies, Social Sciences, *inter alia*. A formal evaluation is needed but there appears to be greater collaboration among researchers from different disciplines and institutions since 2020. Nevertheless, this is an area that requires further strengthening to keep pace with the rapid increase in multi-disciplinary health research internationally.

The launch of Trinidad and Tobago's first National Health Research Agenda in February 2024 was a significant achievement (2). It is probably the only active Agenda in the Caribbean and one of the few in the Americas Region. Work on the agenda started in 2018 and included a series

of stakeholder consultations including a reverse research day when health decision makers presented their needs to researchers. A Delphi methodology was then used to generate and rank research topics that are aligned with the country's strategic health priorities as defined by the Ministry of Health. The Agenda has been widely disseminated among all the key stakeholders, especially the institutions involved in the conduct and funding of research. We look forward to national resources being invested in the conduct of these priority research. However, while efforts are being made to encourage this, it must be noted that the World Bank has reported that Research and Development (R&D) expenditure in Trinidad and Tobago was only 0.05% of GDP in 2021 (3). This is very sobering and there is clearly a need to address this shortfall, especially when the global average is 2.62%. Of interest, R&D expenditure is 0.62% of GDP for the Latin America and Caribbean region. Notwithstanding, we look forward to the conduct of the priority research and for the papers to be presented at the Annual National Health Research Conference.

The Second Global Evidence Summit was recently hosted by the global leaders in evidence-based policy and practice under the theme of '*Using evidence. Improving lives*' (4). While the value of systematic reviews, in particular living evidence syntheses (5), was highlighted, there was agreement on the importance of local context. That is, there is always a critical need for national research findings to complement comprehensive reviews developed using the best globally available evidence. Therefore, the NHRC's role in disseminating local research findings is crucial and further facilitates the utilization of evidence in health decision-making. This was also highlighted in a project to strengthen the institutionalization of Evidence Informed Decision Making in T&T. The study is led by the World Health Organization in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the Evidence for Policy & Practice Information (EPPI) Centre, University College of London, and the Caribbean Centre for Health Systems Research and Development, University of the West Indies.

The theme for the 2024 NHRC is "*Digital Health Transformation: Leveraging Technology for Better Care*", highlighting the crucial role of technology in revolutionis-

ing healthcare in Trinidad and Tobago. During the Opening Ceremony, the international feature lecture will be presented by Marcelo D'Agostino, Chief of Information Systems and Digital Health, Pan American Health Organization. The Minister of Health, Honourable Terrence Deyalsingh, has always supported the NHRC and will again deliver the feature address at the Opening. The NHRC will also end on a high as at the Closing Ceremony, Dr Dan Ramdath, a leading Caribbean health researcher, will be presented with the Lifetime Health Research Achievement Award.

We salute the T&T researchers for their dedication and commitment to sharing the findings, the audiences for their active participation in debates and discussions of presentations, and the sponsors for their timely support over the first five years of the NHRC. It is also important to recognize the partners that have placed the nation's health at the forefront and collaborated to host the NHRC. They include the Ministry of Health; Tobago House of Assembly; Faculty of Medical Sciences & Caribbean Centre for Health Systems Research and Development, The University of the West Indies; The University of Trinidad and Tobago; The University of the Southern Caribbean; the Regional Health Authorities; and the Trinidad and Tobago National Nursing Association.

The stage is well set for a grand fifth-anniversary celebration of health research in Port-of-Spain in November 2024.

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Many thanks to all members for their invaluable support and contributions toward planning and making the National Health Research Conference a success.

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