

A New Strategy to Increase Scientific Publications and Facilitate Research Uptake in the Caribbean

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The Annual Caribbean Health Research Conference has been recognized as the primary forum for the sharing of research outputs in the Caribbean for the last 60 years. The value and longevity of the Conference are largely due to the unique mix of its delegates, which have always included, *inter alia*, the region's Chief Medical Officers. Consequently, the latter's participation has resulted in the uptake of research to guide the development of health policies and programmes in their respective countries. Indeed, the Conference has had a significant impact on the health of the Caribbean people by enabling innovative practice and evidence-informed health policies (1). Over the last six decades, there have been more than 4200 presentations at the Conference. Remarkably, the number continues to increase each year. There were 32 papers in its inaugural year (1956) compared with over 170 in 2015 when the Conference celebrated its 60th Diamond Jubilee. In addition to its growth, there have been a number of innovations that were introduced to ensure that the Conference remained relevant, addressing the needs of its stakeholders. Notably, since 1983 the abstracts of the papers presented have been published in a yearly Supplement of the West Indian Medical Journal (WIMJ). This initiative ensured that the research findings were available to health professionals and policy-makers who were not present at the Conference. Even so, the researchers who made the presentations were encouraged to publish the full texts in peer reviewed journals, including the WIMJ.

However, the findings of a study conducted in 2000 revealed a low conversion rate (2) and programmes were introduced to increase the number of publications such as the hosting of scientific writing workshops. There was also the requirement that researchers submit full manuscripts to be considered for presentation at the Conference. The reasoning behind the latter was that since a full text was already prepared, it can then be reformatted, if necessary, and sent to a journal for publication. Nevertheless, there has been limited success in terms of an increase in publications. In order to improve the publication rate, we have now implemented an even more innovative initiative. Having received the support from WIMJ, the Caribbean Public Health Agency's (CARPHA) Research Advisory Committee identified a few of the more outstanding studies with policy and programme implications, which were

presented at the 2013 Conference, for publication in a Special Issue of WIMJ. These manuscripts were subjected to a rigid peer-review process before they were accepted for publication.

This Special WIMJ Issue is unique as it comprises the full text of research that was presented at the Annual Caribbean Health Research Conference. It not only addresses the need to increase the number of Conference presentations that are subsequently published but also the accessibility of Caribbean research findings through regional and international databases. This is noteworthy as CARPHA has a commitment to ensure that research evidence is available and accessible to guide policy making in the region. Indeed, at the recent launch of the *EvIDeNce* portal by CARPHA at the 2015 Research Conference, the value of having accessible full text papers of Caribbean research was highlighted. The Caribbean Public Health Agency's *EvIDeNce* is the Evidence Informed Decision Making Network of the Caribbean (3). This strategic initiative was established to provide support to Caribbean countries as they make evidence-informed health policy decisions by making robust and relevant research findings more accessible. This includes promoting knowledge exchange and regular dialogue between policy-makers, researchers and other stakeholders as well as building the competencies needed by policy-makers to incorporate research evidence in their policy and planning processes.

The publication of this Special Issue is also very timely as it follows the launch of the excellent report commemorating the 60th Diamond Jubilee of the annual Conference (4). The report includes some very informative statistics. For example, when the research presented at the annual Conference for the last decade was analysed by the programme areas of the Caribbean Cooperation in Health (CCH III), the areas in which most of the research was conducted were family health (25.4%), non-communicable diseases [NCDs] (20.9%), communicable diseases including HIV (12.3%) and health services research (12.2%). Notably, the manuscripts published in this issue are an excellent reflection of this. Family health, which as defined by CCH III includes child health and development, reproductive and sexual health, adolescent health, *inter alia*, was represented in most of the papers. In addition, two addressed NCDs (5, 6) and two communicable diseases including HIV (7, 8). It must also be noted that the Health Research Agenda for the Caribbean (9), which defines the priority areas for health research in the region is closely aligned to CCH III. Critically, the research presented at the Conference and published in this Special Issue is making a timely contribution to

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the dissemination of research findings as the Agenda is implemented. Of special significance is the paper on environmental health (10). This is an under-researched area that is likely to increase in prominence in the Caribbean given the importance and attention being paid to climate change globally as well as its impact on health.

A remarkable feature of the annual Conference is the wide participation of Caribbean countries producing quality research (4). This is reflected in the Special Issue, which includes reports of research conducted in six of CARPHA's Member States. Good science is not determined by the size of a country where a researcher is based. This is exemplified by the presence of an excellent paper from the Turks and Caicos Islands (11), a British Overseas Territory with a population of just over 30 000.

At CARPHA, we see the publication of this Special Issue as another innovative strategy to support our efforts to promote the uptake of research that will guide policies, programmes and clinical practice. Indeed, we expect that this will be the first of many, perhaps biennial, special issues of WIMJ that publish and make available full manuscripts from the research presented at the annual Caribbean Health Research Conference. The latter is now themed so future special issues are likely to focus on research consistent with the Conference theme.

In closing, I congratulate the scientists who had their research published in this Special Issue. It is also important to recognize all the health professionals who conduct priority research and choose to share their findings at the annual Caribbean Health Research Conference, which the longest serving health research conference in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the largest scientific meeting in the Caribbean. We look forward to your continued dedication toward the conduct of quality research. You can rest assured that the fruits of your efforts are making valuable contributions by providing the evidence to guide the work of the region's

policy-makers, programme managers and healthcare providers. Lastly, I must thank the West Indian Medical Journal for collaborating with CARPHA to make this initiative a reality.

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