

EDITORIAL

Launching the *African Journal of Reproductive Health*

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It is now more than two years since the 1994 Population and Development Conference at Cairo endorsed a shift from targeted population control to the promotion of reproductive health and rights. Commitments to improving reproductive health and rights have been adopted by numerous governments, bilateral and multi-lateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations throughout the world. These efforts have begun to bear fruit in both the growing number of research activities, new health services, and the development of indicators by which to evaluate reproductive health programs and services.

Despite such commitments to reproductive health, there is cause for concern, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. High rates of maternal mortality, unsafe abortion, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS underscore the weakness of underlying health systems in the region, and the fundamental obstacles to improving health and rights. How can we hope to promote *reproductive health* when so many aspects of the health system are impoverished?

Hope lies in several sectors, but in our view much can be accomplished through improved research and communication, and the building of scientific infrastructure. At present, many health developments in sub-Saharan Africa are held in check by scientific and scholarly isolation. Scholarship builds, incrementally, on the work of others, and programmatic solutions are most effective when they are evaluated and refined through

scientific exchange. Likewise, perceptions of individual rights can follow the witnessing of another's declaration and definition of a human right. Shared information is necessary to improve reproductive health and rights.

At present, multiple factors conspire to isolate Africa's health scientists. The continent carries fewer than five percent of global telecommunications lines, postal services are costly and unreliable, and even airlines too often fail to link neighbouring countries, requiring Africans to travel north to Europe for transit across their own continent. Libraries frequently lack hard currency to purchase international or regional journals, and archives are riddled with gaps.

Several positive initiatives to address these problems are underway: HealthNet is providing linkages that can bypass poor local lines, USAID has a multi-country project to further internet connections, and the US National Research Council has recently compiled communications case studies from which we can all learn. Nonetheless, creative investing by the development banks or the like could further the impact of all our research efforts if it were devoted to building more modern telephone connections or more extensive satellite systems.

It is within this context of needing new venues for scientific communication that the *African Journal of Reproductive Health* is inaugurated. Our aim is for the *Journal* to provide a pan-African and international forum for health scientists to document

and disseminate their findings on reproductive problems in sub-Saharan Africa. Through its editorials, reviews and articles we anticipate that the *Journal* will further regional and international awareness of basic health conditions and strategic needs for improving reproductive health in the region. If we succeed, the *Journal* will become a valuable source for scientists, policy makers, program officers, and activists working to improve reproductive health in the African region, and the world.

From the outset the *African Journal of Reproductive Health* will be available in both hard copy and electronically on the World Wide Web. Recognising the numerous obstacles to both hard copy and electronic circulation, we anticipate maintaining both systems for the indefinite future. Through whatever means possible we will aim to provide rapid review and publication of all accepted materials, in order that we can do our part to accelerate the dissemination of scientific information in the region.

Finally, as any journal draws on the fiscal, intellectual, and technical support of a broad community—such is the case with the *African Journal of Reproductive Health*. The editorial staff and trustees of the Women's Health Action Research Centre sincerely thank the many colleagues who have already contributed to the establishment of the *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, and we look forward to expanding collaborations. In particular, we owe special thanks to the Ford Foundation for providing funds to the project and for being patriotic allies in the effort to promote reproductive health in Africa.

We look forward to facilitating improved scientific communications across African and international boundaries for betterment of reproductive health and rights.

REFERENCES

National Research Council. *Bridge builders: African experiences with information and communication technology*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1996.