

Operational Research – Putting Ideas into Practice: The Research of Improvement

Research is the driving force for progress in all the scientific fields, and the World Health Organization has also recognized health research as cornerstone for all national and international health policies; the World Health Report in 2012 for the first time in its history focused on the theme of “No Health without Research.” Although research activities are conducted in diverse fields of science, the defining principles of research are typically the same. All research/health research starts with a quest of knowledge and is expected to enhance existing knowledge or improve health of the populations. However, ground reality differs in the fact that there is a huge gap in what we know from research and how we implement this research. In practice, the latter is seldom monitored; tracking the effects of research on policy, practice, and program performance beyond publication rarely occurs. Operational/operations/implementation research plays a significant role in bridging this know-do or implementation gap, particularly in field of health care where it is essential to ensure that limited resources invested in health to strengthen health services and benefit populations. It is a discipline that uses advanced analytical methods to better understand complex systems and aid in decision-making.

Many definitions of operational research (OR) exist, but from a disease control perspective, it is the search for knowledge on strategies, interventions, or technologies that can improve the results of the health programs under investigation. OR focuses on finding, measurable, easy to implement, and sustainable solutions to the problems in program implementation. The need for operational research arises when there is a discrepancy between what is and what should be, operational research is particularly effective in analyzing complex global health issues – especially in settings where the burden of disease is high, but health systems are weak and resources are limited. This research should provide answers of direct, practical relevance to improvement of health-care delivery and should ensure that investments are used wisely to maximize health returns. OR is sufficiently effective when carried out by the unit of program implementers and researchers who work in close association with each other. The key elements of OR are the specific factors in particular program that are under the control of the implementers and contribute to achieving program objectives; if not, then the research is not OR. The methods of OR range from the qualitative to the quantitative, and the study designs from the nonexperimental to the true experimental. On the ground, it is an iterative process, and changes in policy and/or practice are the ultimate end measure of success of OR.



The subject of OR is increasingly being discussed, and it has contributed to an improvement in performance or influenced policy change at district, national, or even international levels, for example; adoption of the WHO antiretroviral therapy (ART) guidelines with ART being offered to all HIV Infected TB patients countrywide. The National TB program in India adopted a single sputum specimen policy for monitoring multidrug-resistant TB patients while on treatment. Despite this demonstrated program strengthening value of OR, the implementation of OR is weak in many of the low- and middle-income countries that are in most need of it.

Regardless of this encouraging momentum in public health, very little OR emerges from the oral health research. This disparity cannot be reduced in an isolated way but may effectively take place through work within the framework of the health research. Oral health needs to be prioritized as part of the global strategy for better health.

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