ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Series: Clinical Epidemiology in South Africa. Paper 1: Evidence-based health care and policy in Africa: past, present, and future

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Abstract

Africa has high disease burden and health system challenges but is making progress in recognizing, accepting, and adopting evidence-based health care (EBHC). In this article, we reflect on the developments of the past 2 decades and consider further steps that will help with the translation of reliable research results into the decision making process. There has been a rapid growth in various initiatives to promote EBHC in the African region. These include the conduct and reporting of primary and secondary research, research capacity development and supportive initiatives, access to information, and work with decision makers in getting research into clinical guidelines and health policies. Much, however, still needs to be done to improve the impact on health in the region. A multipronged approach consisting of regionally relevant well-conducted research addressing priority health problems, increased uptake of research in health care policy and practice, dedicated capacity development initiatives to support the conduct as well as use of research, facilitated by wider collaboration, and equitable partnerships will be important. Working together in mutually supporting partnerships is key to advancing both evidence-informed health care practices and better health.

Keywords: Evidence-based health care; Africa; Reflection; Policy; Collaboration; Relevance

1. Relevance of evidence-based health care and policy in Africa

The disease burden in countries of Africa remains high: with increases in chronic non-infectious diseases adding to the already existing large burden of infectious diseases, injuries, and maternal and child health conditions [1]. Government health care is poorly resourced in general, with poor health system infrastructure and limited human resources. In the public sector, global initiatives and funds from donors can put pressure on existing services by funding particular initiatives, such as targeted disease control programs. These can distort national priorities and human resource allocations.

The formal private sector though not well developed is increasingly becoming so in both middle- and low-income African countries, whereas the public health care system is perceived to offer “poor services for the poor.” Under these conditions, individuals and communities increasingly turn to private health care (formal or informal) and self-treatment. This may result in their exploitation by predatory companies making false claims about their products and services, particularly in environments where the levels of income and education are low and government regulations non-existent or not enforced. Having ready access to reliable health care information will help the public, clinicians, and governments to make the right choices [2].

Evidence-based clinical care, the integration of current best available research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values and preferences, is gaining momentum in the African region. Whilst initially arising from clinical medicine to guide clinical decisions, increasingly these decisions impact on national and global policies; and the methods of research synthesis are being applied to public health problems. In the context of this broadened agenda, evidence-based health care (EBHC) and policy is a better way of describing the current status of shifting from research into public health policy and clinical practice and is the scope of this article.

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Important strides have been taken to get EBHC onto the agenda at regional, national, and local levels in some countries of Africa. In this article, we reflect on the developments of the past 2 decades and consider further steps required to ensure that the results of reliable research continue to inform decision making on the continent.

2. EBHC in Africa: the past 2 decades

Globally, there has been an explosion of efforts aimed at developing research synthesis methods, conducting systematic reviews, and designing structured ways of getting evidence into health care policies. People in Africa have played a key role in this process, mainly through Cochrane. Since its inception in 1997, Cochrane South Africa has formed part of this global network. It has worked with various stakeholders inside and outside of Africa to raise awareness of the importance of EBHC. It has spearheaded the conduct and support of regionally relevant Cochrane Reviews. Data from Cochrane’s contact database in September 2014 show that the number of Cochrane contributors from the Cochrane South Africa reference region (comprising a total of 25 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa) has increased considerably, with the majority located in South Africa and Nigeria (Fig. 1). Working with Cochrane Review Groups for Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/AIDS and Infectious diseases, Cochrane South Africa has trained, mentored, and supported a large number of African review authors. An average of 44 full Cochrane Reviews and 26 protocols were published each year by authors from Africa during 2009–2013. These authors frequently act as change agents advocating the use of systematic reviews within their home institutions and countries [3]. On an international scale, they have challenged global policy, for example, on the use of directly observed treatment strategy for tuberculosis [4] and continue to contribute to clinical guideline development. In the recent World Health Organization (WHO) Malaria guidelines, more than three-quarters of the 11 Cochrane Reviews informing guideline development were authored by Africans [5].

Systematic reviews help to identify gaps in the research base. There has been an increase in research productivity in the African region since 1991 which has been shown to be associated with the number of epidemiology training programs, especially at the masters level [6] and national gross domestic product [7]. The conduct of randomized trials, specifically, is being strengthened through funding from the US National Institutes of Health, Wellcome Trust, and the EDCTP among others; the development of research ethics committees; the Pan African Clinical Trials Registry which allows prospective registration of trials [8,9]; and dedicated capacity development initiatives primarily through Masters and PhD programs. While the growth in research productivity is a welcome development, it remains unclear to what extent research is being informed by findings from systematic reviews. Furthermore, there is still a huge discrepancy between research capacity in Africa compared to that of Europe and North America [10]. This links with various factors, such as the lack of sustained investment in research and research capacity building and a lack of alignment between national and regional priorities and available funding [11].

The availability of research evidence is, of course, only one of the inputs into the complex process of health care decision making [12]. Health care decisions made by policy makers, health care professionals, managers, researchers, media, professional associations, and the public at large are influenced by many factors including cost, feasibility, and availability of products and services [13]. The priority given to best evidence in decisions can be influenced by these, as well many other factors, particularly competing interests, whether commercial, academic, or political [14].

We have witnessed a positive change in attitudes toward the use of evidence in health care planning. For example, at the start of the 21st century, when high rates of mother-to-child transmission of HIV was an important health problem, a Cochrane Review was undertaken in response to a direct request from the South African Department of Health for evidence on the effects of antiretroviral drugs for its prevention. On presenting the evidence to key decision makers, the door was literally closed in the face of the researchers because the evidence did not speak to what the decision makers wanted to hear. This was an all too typical case of policy-based evidence (finding evidence to confirm instead of inform policy decisions) winning over evidence-based policy [15]. Today, with the caveat that one needs to be clear on what the phrase means, it is unusual to see any policy without the words “evidence based” in it.

It must be kept in mind that for evidence-informed policy making to succeed, proactive engagement of researchers with policy makers and other decision makers is required. Here, initiatives such as the Effective Health Care Research Consortium (EHCRC), an international
Box 1 Recommendations from the Kigali declaration [27]

- A sustainable collaboration to foster evidence-based health care in Africa is developed
- Health workers, policy makers, and researchers are trained, and infrastructure is provided to support evidence-based health care
- Evidence-based health care is integrated into health education curricula
- All health workers have access to relevant electronic health information resources
- Systematic reviews and guidelines relevant to African health care needs and disease burden are developed
- Health care practitioners, policy makers, and consumers of health care are supported to identify and use reliable evidence in making health care decisions
- Effective dissemination and implementation strategies are established
- Research to further strengthen the knowledge base for the implementation of evidence-based health care in the African context is encouraged and supported
- Centers and satellite offices for evidence-based health care are established in countries.

There have also been promising developments in clinical guideline development and evaluation in the African region [13,19,20]. For example, Kredo et al. [19] assessed 30 regional guidelines from 13 countries linked to five priority diseases and found quality gaps in relation to the AGREE II tool and variable concordance with current best evidence. In this series, the assessment by Machingaidze [21] of South African primary health care guidelines had similar findings illustrating the need for dedicated initiatives to advance and promote guideline development, reporting, and implementation. Sinclair et al. [13] have similarly described a project in which researchers worked with the Ghana National Drugs Program to review the evidence base for five priority areas in pediatric medicine. They considered both the international evidence base and the local applicability of the evidence and presented these as structured summaries to be used by guideline development teams.

Indeed, the Paediatric Association of Kenya is using explicit, transparent guideline development procedures. They made clear recommendations about stopping bolus fluids in shocky children based on the totality of the evidence (including the large FEAST trial in Africa evaluating this) [22], recommendations that the WHO has not yet implemented. This has benefited children by improving clinical care, reducing bolus treatments and saving lives, and shown that an African country appraise and apply evidence ahead of any guidelines from WHO.

It is clear that existing international evidence-informed clinical guidelines are not always taken into account by African guideline development groups. This may be due to the peculiarities of local health systems, such as specific clinical care pathways and resource limitations, knowledge of evidence, and a reliance on clinical experience. To accelerate the availability and implementation of high-quality local guidelines, a shift from new guideline development to guideline adaptation [23], application, and evaluation would be helpful.

There has been recent growing recognition of the need for EBHC as demonstrated by multiple initiatives to promote the use of evidence in policy making and practice (Table 1), the increased number of systematic reviews being commissioned and funded, and an increase in institutional initiatives to support the conduct of research. There has also been improved access to evidence through the HINARI initiative [24] and free one-click access to the Cochrane Library for people in many African countries. Furthermore, postgraduate and continuing professional development courses in EBHC are increasing whether measured in the number of programs or the number of enrollees [25,26]. In 2012, the signing of the Kigali declaration on EBHC [27] by representatives from academia, hospitals, NGOs, and research institutions from nine African countries, forming part of the Collaboration for Evidence-based Health in Africa, signaled a key milestone in the recognition of EBHC and the momentum for moving toward the implementation of evidence-based practices (Box 1).

3. Future role of EBHC in Africa

How can we ensure that all these developments in EBHC have the greatest impact on improving the lives of
A multipronged approach consisting of regionally relevant and robust research addressing priority health problems, increased uptake of research in health care policy and practice, dedicated capacity development initiatives to support the conduct as well as use of research, and facilitated by wider collaboration will be important. Avoiding research waste and unnecessary duplication will help ensure that initiatives remain sustainable.
3.1. Conducting regionally relevant robust new research

New research needs to be informed by the existing body of research [28,29], and such primary studies and systematic reviews must seek to answer relevant research questions [30]. They should not be driven solely by the agendas of funders or researchers. In striving for global excellence and local relevance, African researchers need to stay abreast of methodological developments and remain cognizant of research integrity principles. In this series, Rohwer et al. [31] describe the application of logic model templates for systematic reviews and health technology assessments of complex interventions. Various postgraduate programs play a significant role in building relevant capacity [6]. However, these will need to be complemented by efforts to improve science literacy in schools, broad-based initiatives to empower a critical mass of local researchers to conduct and deliver internationally competitive research, support senior researchers to become role models and leaders, create enabling institutional environments for research, and build closer relationships between researchers on the one hand and health decision makers, funders and the public on the other [11].

Dedicated specialized institutional and regional initiatives (centers of excellence) can also make an important contribution. For example, regional biostatisticians are joining together to strengthen capacity in biostatistics in Sub-Saharan Africa by increasing the number, and standards of, postgraduate programs in biostatistics [32,33] to facilitate collaborative research initiatives and build biostatistics literacy. This aligns with the INCLEN, the International Clinical Epidemiology Network, which includes seven regional networks. Through the development of Clinical Epidemiology Units, INCLEN has strengthened research capacity of medical schools in the African region [34]. Clinical epidemiologists, as key champions, link with biostatisticians and other researchers to foster research conduct and dissemination.

3.2. Promoting the use of research to inform policy and practice

The availability of robust research evidence on its own is not enough to impact on health care [34–36]. Sensitization of undergraduates—the next generation of health care practitioners, health care managers, policy makers, and researchers—to the importance of research in decision making is important. Internationally, there is recognition and acceptance of the need to include teaching and learning of EBHC in the training of all health care professionals [37,38]. Despite this recognition, there is a still a general lack of coordinated country and regional efforts to support integration of EBHC at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Evidence-informed strategies should be used to direct how EBHC learning can be mainstreamed into health professions education [39]. As part of the momentum toward transformative health professions education [40], the process of curriculum review presents useful opportunities to include and enhance EBHC learning. For instance, the Committee for Undergraduate Education and Training of the Health Professions Council of South Africa has adopted a modified version of the CanMEDS framework for establishing graduate attributes of a newly qualified health care professional [41]. It provides a guide to the essential competencies health professionals must have to optimize patient outcomes. The framework defines the attributes of the graduate according to seven interdependent roles: Medical Expert, Scholar (which includes most of the aspects of EBHC), Professional, Communicator, Collaborator, Manager, and Health Advocate.

Undergraduate training programs in South Africa are being reviewed to better reflect these attributes. This period of change to the curriculum provides a window of opportunity to introduce, strengthen, and integrate multifaceted EBHC teaching and learning with assessment [39,42]. The process starts by assessing the current curriculum [43,44] and moves on to working with lecturers and program convenors to plan pre-clinical and clinical EBHC learning, getting institutional buy in, and enhancing the competencies of the trainers to facilitate learning and, most importantly, acting as role models [45,46]. In the course of these activities, academic institutions can benefit through sharing best practices and using robust evaluations alongside implementation.

Researchers also need to understand how the policy process and health system work and engage with policy makers to understand their priorities and information needs. This will guide efforts to access and interpret existing research, especially systematic reviews, conduct new research (where necessary), and complete and communicate research timely and in appropriately tailored formats [47], to inform decision making at both policy development and implementation level. Clinical guideline development can be enhanced by following standardized approaches, followed by dedicated initiatives to support guideline implementation and evaluation. National and regional initiatives in this regard are in the pipeline. The recently launched G-I-N Africa [48] describes itself as “a regional community of clinical practice guideline developers, users, and other stakeholders from the African continent who are interested in improving the effectiveness, rigor, and efficiency of guideline development, adaptation, dissemination, implementation, and performance measurement.” initiatives such as these need support and engagement from guideline development teams and ministries of health to avoid unnecessary duplication and ensure sustainability and impact.

3.3. Partnership and collaboration are key guiding principles

Collaboration between researchers and decision makers, between academic institutions, between academic and
research institutions, and between cadres of specialist staff is key to moving toward the common goal of evidence-informed health care practices in the African region. By sharing best practices, collaborating and partnering on research and capacity development initiatives, avoiding unnecessary duplication, and building equitable [49] long-term relationships, African efforts to promote EBHC will go further [34,50,51].

4. Conclusion

There has been a rapid growth in various initiatives to promote EBHC in the African region. Much still needs to be done to improve impact on health in the region. Working together in mutually supporting partnerships is key to advancing both evidence-informed health care practices and better health.

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