Investing in Health Research and Development

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Health Research Relating to Future Intervention Options

convened under the auspices of the World Health Organization

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Preface

Many factors shape the health of individuals and the great variability of health within and across populations. Genetic endowments, of course, play a role. Economic status strongly affects outcomes by working through a range of more proximal determinants—including consumption of food that is adequate in quantity and quality, access to clean water and satisfactory sanitation, adequate shelter and access to health services. Poverty, thus, is a major cause of poor health—and it also perpetuates it: investments in health have become essential to economic growth policies that seek to improve the lot of the poor. Education, like economic status, works through multiple channels to influence health. Educated individuals quickly learn and adopt sanitary behaviours, more efficiently use food, more effectively utilize health services for themselves and their families and are more likely to avoid health risks such as tobacco use. Measured effects of education on health prove consistently large.

Half of all the gains in human life expectancy of the past several thousand years have occurred in this century. Some of these gains have resulted directly from the improvements in economic and educational standards that have recently transformed the material lives of most—but far from all—of the world’s population. Improvements in income and education account, however, for only part of this century’s remarkable improvements in health. At the turn of the century the people of a country with an income level of US$5,000 per capita (in purchasing power adjusted for inflation) would typically have had a life expectancy under 50 years; today the number is close to 75. Why this enormous difference after controlling for income? Important as income and education undoubtedly are, another factor—advance in scientific knowledge and its application both in creating powerful interventions and in guiding behaviour—has, perhaps, become even more important.

What are the implications for policy? One is that if knowledge gains prove even partially as important for future health improvements as they have in the past century—and this Report points to a number of reasons for expecting this to be so—then investments in health R&D will continue to have high payoffs in health status and economic productivity. Assuring an adequate level of R&D investment then holds strong claim on health budgets—a claim for more than the approximately 3% now committed. Equally important—or more important—is that the investments be efficient in generating useful new knowledge and products.

This Report deals with policy for health R&D investments of particular relevance to the poor in low-income and middle-income countries. We estimate these investments to have been about US$ 2 billion annually in the early 1990s (out of a total of something over US$ 50 billion spent globally on health R&D). The Report addresses the central question of how best to focus R&D investments when resources are tightly constrained. It also addresses the institutional question of how to create an incentive and information environment that leads to efficient utilization of R&D investments, including the related issues of competitive resource allocation and of appropriate incentives for engaging the private sector more fully. Since most of the products of health R&D can be shared by many or all countries—in that sense they are international “public goods”—the Report deals with an additional set of issues involving the generation and coordination of international collective action. Collective action has been neglected, and the Report suggests directions that might be taken to correct this.

This Report results from the deliberations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Health Research Relating to Future Intervention Options and of staff work undertaken to inform those deliberations. Two lines of thought led to the formation, under the auspices of the World Health Organization, of the Ad Hoc Committee. The first, summarized in the preceding paragraphs, pointed to the central role that advances in knowledge have played (at least in the past century) in driving the enormous improvement in human health. In particular, the World Bank’s World development report 1993: investing in health (World Bank 1993) had reached this conclusion and pointed to the importance of improving the use of international assistance for health by paying more careful attention to the role of knowledge generation and dissemination. At about the same time several private foundations that had actively supported tropical disease research noted not only that their own efforts were likely to decline but, also, that replacement funding sources remained to be identified. These foundations and a range of other investors in health R&D then joined with WHO in establishing the Ad Hoc Committee to address priorities for health R&D, prospects for funding, and institutional changes (at both the national and international level) that might enhance the productivity of ongoing R&D expenditures.

The Ad Hoc Committee’s mandate was broad: in addition to research, it was to address development of the products and procedures that translate research findings into practical tools (and, therefore, it was to pay careful attention to the role of the private sector); it was to include considerations of nutrition and family planning; it was to address issues of behavioural science and health systems research as well as biomedical and clinical R&D; and it was to operate under the assumption that, at best, only very limited additional resources from outside the health sector would be available for financing health R&D in the future.

The composition of the Ad Hoc Committee reflected this broad mandate. Its core membership included the chairs or representatives of the scientific advisory panels for WHO programmes with major research components; but membership was extended to be broadly representative of the disciplines contributing to health R&D. (The Committee Chair, for example, is an econo-
mists; the Co-Chair an immunologist.) Senior representatives of research-oriented pharmaceuticals houses served on the Committee, as did a number of individuals with experience in the highest levels of public service. The Report results from their deliberations (mostly in small groups) over a period of several years. While all members of the Committee agree with the broad thrust of the Report, it is fair to say that each member of the Committee—including the Chair—will differ with a number of specific points in the Report. The Committee sought to inform debate with its Report; no effort was made to reach consensus on every point.

Too often priorities for public sector health R&D investments are determined with little concern for the magnitude of the problem to be addressed, for the extent to which scientific judgement supports the possibility that new products and initiatives will be more cost-effective than available alternatives, or for ongoing efforts elsewhere. These considerations figure prominently in private sector product development decisions. The Committee endeavoured to generate information relevant to an analytical approach that combines use of available quantified data with informed judgement. This approach facilitated identification of specific high priority product development opportunities and led the Committee to the conclusion that available R&D resources would be more productive if concentrated on these “best buys” rather than remaining dispersed.

Because of limited time and resources, this approach could not be applied across the whole field of health R&D. The Committee nonetheless generated a wealth of information that was useful in its work and that, we hope, will prove valuable to others in assessing policy for health R&D and resource allocation. In particular, the Committee’s commitment to careful consideration of the problem of the magnitude of disease burden has led to a major reassessment of global patterns of cause of death and disease burden, to assessment of burden resulting from major risk factors (to guide resource allocation concerning prevention), and to projecting burden forward to the year 2020. This work on disease burden substantially revised and extended work undertaken earlier for the World Bank and the World Health Organization. Annexes 1 and 2 summarize findings from this effort; detailed results appear in a series of companion volumes to this Report, the Global Burden of Disease and Injury Series, edited by C. J. L. Murray and A. D. Lopez and published by Harvard University Press for the World Health Organization and the World Bank.

What, then, are the conclusions reached and directions suggested? The Committee concluded that four challenges to health systems will remain important for a decade or more to come and that specific R&D initiatives would contribute significantly to meeting these challenges.

- Despite progress there remains a huge and unnecessary burden of infectious disease among the poor that can be addressed with available cost-effective interventions. Addressing this unfinished agenda is most-likely a matter of political will and (modest) commitment of resources. But R&D can help through operational and behavioural research to facilitate implementation (often by developing and evaluating linked packages of care, such as the proposed Mother-Baby package) and by selective development of new tools, including improvements in vaccines.

- A more global class of challenges results from the continuously changing nature of microbial threats. New pathogens—such as HIV—and evolution of drug-resistant variants of familiar ones (e.g., ones causing tuberculosis and malaria) create needs for biomedical understanding, for understanding of systemic determinants of the spread of drug resistance, and for new drugs and vaccines.

- Low-income and middle-income countries increasingly face major (and hitherto neglected) epidemics of noncommunicable diseases and injury. Selected psychiatric conditions, heart disease, stroke and road-traffic accidents dominate the disease profile we project for these countries for the year 2020. R&D is required to ascertain ways of preventing and managing these conditions under budgetary constraints far more stringent than in the high-income countries, which have dealt with the problems far longer.

- Finally, health systems themselves vary greatly in how efficiently and equitably they provide services. Research can assist decision-makers to solve specific problems, to learn from the experience of others, and to place the performance and characteristics of their systems into international and historical context. Such research should pay careful attention to measurement of performance and should include investigation into health systems and their finance, the determinants of the behaviour of health care providers and the behaviour of individuals and households.

In some cases additional resources (probably from lower priority areas within national health budgets or health aid budgets) will be required to meet these R&D needs adequately. In many cases institutional change will be necessary to create the information and incentives required for efficient resource allocation. At the international level resource allocation has often lacked focus (resulting in failure to bring results to the point of application) and has neglected important conditions and issues while providing (relatively) generously for less important ones. Reform is needed. Successful models of competitively driven international funding (and experience-sharing) networks should be applied to currently neglected clusters of conditions. For development of new drugs and other tools, the Report proposes establishing a Health Product Development Facility to address problems that the private sector now neglects; this would be accomplished in part by improving incentives for engaging private sector talent.

In addition, and importantly, a mechanism is needed for exchanging ideas about progress and priorities in R&D, for tracking flows of funding and identifying im-
portant gaps, and for creating an environment where investors and research institutions can agree on approaches to close those gaps. To meet this need, the Committee proposes creation of a Forum for Investors in International Health R&D. The Report elaborates these proposals.

Global challenges demand, in some sense, a global response. All nations share the fruits of R&D. Even though each country may invest a relatively modest sum towards collective goals, the aggregate effort potentially benefits all substantially. Collective action is the economically rational approach to “public goods” such as R&D; here, responsibility for catalysing collective action lies principally in the hands of the global community. Far from overshadowing action at the national level, global efforts help both to make national R&D efforts more productive and to lead to a global result that exceeds the sum of national ones.

Thus, among the many competing demands on the funds allocated to international assistance for health, those contributing to generation of the new knowledge, products and interventions that can be shared by all have special merit.

Yet the commitment to R&D has been declining. If the international system collectively fails to invest in productive R&D—or to generate incentives for individual countries or the private sector to do so—then, in all likelihood, great opportunities to improve human welfare and productivity will be missed entirely. The challenge to donors in times of budgetary stringency is to recognize that their own comparative advantage lies in supporting the generation and dissemination of knowledge—knowledge that, with its multiplier potential for empowering individuals and health systems, can yield a health impact that far exceeds what donors can achieve with their limited capacity to finance or deliver services.

We complete this preface at the final meeting associated with the Ad Hoc Committee’s work. That meeting—convened by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and hosted by the World Health Organization in Geneva, 27–29 June 1996—brought together researchers, government officials, NGOs and investors in research to review the final draft of this Report. Participants in the meeting raised a range of critical points and suggested changes in emphasis or priority; but, on the whole, the meeting conveyed a broad sense of agreement on the direction the Report suggests. In particular, participants endorsed the Report’s recommendation for a Forum on International Health R&D that brings together investors in R&D with other stakeholders for discussions on priorities—discussions to be informed by ongoing analytic efforts. We have every hope that the forum will prove to be a mechanism for mobilizing the efforts that will lead to a growing knowledge base for improving the health, well-being and productivity of the poor.

29 June 1996

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Acknowledgements

Three individuals made critical contributions to the Committee's work. Dr Thomas Nchinda of WHO both managed and informed the Committee's work throughout the past two years; his good cheer and substantive contributions were of great value. Mr Leslie Evans of the Center for Pacific Rim Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, served as Production Editor for the Committee's Report; in this role he contributed to and managed the editing process, oversaw typesetting and layout and made all arrangements for publication. His skill, long hours and good humour contributed enormously. Ms Phyllida Brown, a free-lance science writer, wrote the Report. Working closely with the Committee and WHO staff, she translated ideas, background materials, fragmented draft materials and the Committee's conclusions and recommendations into clear English. She played an invaluable and central role in the Committee's work.

The Report's genesis lay both in recognition of the central role that generation of new knowledge has played—and, in all likelihood, will continue to play—in improving health and in the concern of several agencies that fragile funding prospects threatened future health R&D relevant to the needs of low-income and middle-income countries. In particular, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation convened a meeting in Bellagio, Italy, in 1993 to address the problem of providing a solid financial basis for health R&D. The proposal for this Committee's work emerged from that meeting. Other agencies then joined the original three in providing WHO with the financial resources to undertake this effort; these included the Wellcome Trust, the Canadian International Development Research Centre, the International Health Policy Programme, the World Bank and the bilateral development assistance agencies of the governments of Australia, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The financial contribution of these agencies, their ongoing support and their critical reactions to early drafts facilitated the work of the Committee throughout.

We close on a sad note. Professor B.O. Osuntokun, a member of the Ad Hoc Committee and a distinguished neurologist, died during the period of the Committee's work. All of us who worked with him on this effort remember him with respect and fondness.
Contents

Preface ........................................................................ iii
Study participants ......................................................... vii
Acknowledgements ....................................................... ix
Abbreviations and acronyms ......................................... xix
Summary ........................................................................ xxi
  Findings of this Report ............................................... xxi
  Recommendations .................................................. xxxvi

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................... 1
  1.1 The background to this Report ................................. 1
  1.2 Scope and focus .................................................. 4
  1.3 Approach and methods .......................................... 5

Chapter 2: Why invest in health research? Historical experience and the promise of science ........................................ 11
  2.1 The scientific underpinnings of past health improvement ... 12
  2.2 The value of research and the fundamental science base ... 13
  2.3 Looking ahead: research tools for the future ................. 14
  2.4 Chapter summary ............................................... 18

Chapter 3: An unfinished agenda: improving maternal and child health ........................................... 19
  3.1 Responding to children’s needs ............................... 20
  3.2 Achieving safe motherhood ................................... 31
  3.3 Chapter summary and recommendations ................. 34

Chapter 4: The continually changing threat of infectious disease ............................................... 35
  4.1 Tuberculosis ....................................................... 36
  4.2 Pneumococcal disease .......................................... 40
  4.3 Malaria .............................................................. 43
  4.4 HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases ...... 46
  4.5 Maintaining control of microbial threats: global surveillance ... 49
  4.6 Chapter summary and recommendations .................. 51

Chapter 5: The neglected epidemics of noncommunicable diseases and injuries ................................ 55
  5.1 Noncommunicable diseases .................................. 56
  5.2 The accelerating epidemic of injuries ....................... 68
  5.3 Chapter summary and recommendations ................. 73

Chapter 6: Research to inform health policy .................................................. 77
  6.1 Health and the economy ....................................... 77
  6.2 The health system: in pursuit of effective policies ....... 82
  6.3 A new initiative for research in pursuit of better health policies ... 90
  6.4 Chapter summary and recommendations ................. 90

Chapter 7: Responding to needs: institutions, incentives and finance for future health R&D. ................. 93
  7.1 The international health R&D system ....................... 93
  7.2 Building capacity for R&D .................................... 95
  7.3 Accessing the power of the private sector ................. 98
7.4 Investment in health R&D: trends, prospects and proposed solutions .............................................. 101
7.5 Chapter summary and recommendations ......................................................................................... 105

Bibliographical note and references ...................................................................................................... 109
List of supplementary papers ................................................................................................................ 109
Bibliographic notes ................................................................................................................................. 109
References .............................................................................................................................................. 111

Appendix A: Participants in the review .................................................................................................. 117
Appendix B: Study schedule ................................................................................................................... 127
Appendix C: Country composition and demographic projections for each of the eight regional groupings used in this Report .............................................................................................................. 129

Annexes

1. Global patterns of cause of death and burden of disease in 1990, with projections to 2020
   —Christopher J. L. Murray and Alan D. Lopez .................................................................................. 133
2. Assessing the burden of disease that can be attributed to specific risk factors
   —Christopher J. L. Murray and Alan D. Lopez .................................................................................. 187
3. The CGIAR system and its relevance for international health R&D
   —Rajiv L. Misra .................................................................................................................................. 195
4. The pharmaceutical industry and the health needs of developing countries
   —William S. Comanor ......................................................................................................................... 205
5. Resources for health research and development in 1992: a global overview
   —Catherine Michaud and Christopher J. L. Murray ......................................................................... 213
6. Potential role of international health research centres in health and development
   —Demissie Habte .................................................................................................................................. 235
7. Tropical disease: from investigation to eradication
   —Tore Godal ......................................................................................................................................... 239
8. The development of priorities for research relating to households and populations
   —Susan Zimicki, Lilia Duran-Gonzalez, José A. Becerra and David B. Evans ................................. 259
9. Health policy and systems research: issues, methods and priorities
   —Katja Janovsky and Andrew Cassels [This annex summarizes a just-published volume prepared in conjunction with the Committee’s work—see Bibliographical note] ...................... 271

Accompanying volumes
An important input to and product of the Committee’s work was a major revision of available data on mortality by cause and the burden of disease, extension of that work to assess burden from selected risk factors and projections of mortality and burden to the year 2020. Results appear in a 10-volume series—the Global Burden of Disease and Injury Series, edited by Christopher J. L. Murray and Alan D. Lopez. The series is being published by Harvard University Press on behalf of the World Health Organization and the World Bank.

Two volumes in the series appear simultaneously with this Report; the remaining volumes will appear over the coming year. Available now are:

Boxes

Box S.1 Terms of reference of the Ad Hoc Committee ........................................... xxii
Box S.2 Steps to inform R&D resource allocation ............................................... xxvi
Box S.3 Best buys for R&D on the unfinished agenda of maternal and child health .......... xxix
Box S.4 Best buys for R&D on continually changing microbial threats ...................... xxxi
Box S.5 Key investments for R&D into noncommunicable diseases and injuries ............ xxxiii
Box S.6 Key investment for R&D to inform on health policy .................................. xxxiv

Box 1.1 Definitions and explanations of terms used in this Report .......................... 2
Box 1.2 Measuring the burden of disease ............................................................. 6

Box 2.1 Fundamental questions that brought unexpected health benefits .................. 15
Box 2.2 A peer review network for biomedical science ........................................... 16

Box 3.1 The Tanzanian Essential Health Intervention Project .................................. 22
Box 3.2 Malnutrition: why hunger is only half the story ........................................ 24
Box 3.3 Best buys for R&D for child health ......................................................... 30
Box 3.4 Best buys for R&D on maternal and perinatal health .................................. 33

Box 4.1 Action on tuberculosis: an international collaboration ............................... 40
Box 4.2 AIDS vaccines: needs, opportunities and a new initiative .......................... 50
Box 4.3 New diagnostics for STDs needed: specifying the nature of a product .......... 51
Box 4.4 Best buys for R&D on the major microbial threats ....................................... 52

Box 5.1 Traditional medicine: the need for research on efficacy and safety ............... 67
Box 5.2 Alcohol as a risk factor for injury: the South African experience .................... 72
Box 5.3 Key R&D investments for noncommunicable diseases and injuries .................. 73

Box 6.1 Electrification and health: an example of the importance of infrastructure .......... 81
Box 6.2 Research needs for populations and households ........................................... 85
Box 6.3 Priorities for research on health systems and health policies ......................... 88

Box 7.1 Capacity-building: the INCLEN experience .................................................. 99
Box 7.2 High returns: the outcomes of investment in two R&D programmes ............... 104
Box 7.3 The Council on Health Research for Development ...................................... 106

Box A8.1 Priorities for global research concerning populations .............................. 264
Box A8.2 Priorities for research concerning households and individuals ..................... 266
Box A8.3 Major cross-cutting research and development issues .............................. 268
Box A8.4 Recommendations on the process for setting research priorities .................... 268

Text figures

Figure S.1 The disease burden in demographically developing regions, 1990 and projected for 2020 .......................................................... xxiii
Figure S.2 Monumental mismatch: disease burden (DALYs) and R&D spending for the two largest killers, 1990 ................................................... xxviii
Figure S.3 Trends in selected noncommunicable diseases, 1990–2020, demographically developing regions ......................................................... xxxi
Figure S.4 Estimated per cent of global health spending on health R&D, 1992 .............. xxxv

Figure 1.1 Analysing the burden of a health problem to identify research needs .......... 7
Box Figure 1.1.1 Definitions and purpose of R&D .................................................. 3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Trends in life expectancy, 1950–2000</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Life expectancy and income per capita for selected countries and periods</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Traditional enemies: percentage of the burden of disease attributable to maternal, perinatal and childhood conditions (in DALYs), 1990</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Much to gain: the potential impact of the essential packages</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Distribution of 12 million deaths among children less than 5 years old in all developing countries, 1993</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Analysing the burden of pneumonia to identify research needs</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Analysing disease burden of acute watery diarrhoea to assess research needs</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Tuberculosis deaths in sub-Saharan Africa: alternative projections</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Analysing the burden of tuberculosis to assess research needs</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Tuberculosis: impact of a hypothetical prophylactic intervention</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Analysing the burden of pneumococci to identify research needs</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Pneumococcus disease: scenario 1</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Pneumococcus disease: scenario 2</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Pneumococcus disease: scenario 3</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Increase in population aged over 65, 1990–2025, percentage growth</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Distribution of disease burden in 1990 and projected for 2020, India</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Distribution of disease burden in 1990 and projected for 2020, China</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Distribution of disease burden in 1990 and projected for 2020, Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Change in five types of noncommunicable disease, world, 1990–2020</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Change in five types of noncommunicable disease, India, 1990–2020</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Trends in unintentional and intentional injuries, 1990 and 2020</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Health and the economy: two sides of the same coin</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>The international health R&amp;D system: current structure</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>The virtually integrated pharmaceutical group model</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Per cent of global health spending on health R&amp;D, 1992</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>The international health R&amp;D system: proposed enhancement</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.1</td>
<td>Projected income per capita to 2020, demographically developing countries and formerly socialist economies</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.2</td>
<td>Change in DALYs by regions, 1990–2020</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3.1</td>
<td>Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3.2</td>
<td>CGIAR contributions, by donor</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.1</td>
<td>Percentage of global health spending on health R&amp;D, 1992</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.2</td>
<td>Sources of funds for global health R&amp;D, 1992</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.3</td>
<td>Major sources of public funds for health R&amp;D, established market economies</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.4</td>
<td>Public investment in health R&amp;D as a percentage of GDP, established market economies, 1992</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.5</td>
<td>Fund sources for R&amp;D on selected health problems in low-income and middle-income countries, 1992</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.6</td>
<td>ODA health R&amp;D: major funding sources, 1992</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.7</td>
<td>Sources of bilateral ODA for health R&amp;D, 1992</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.8</td>
<td>Expenditures for health R&amp;D by government, pharmaceutical companies and nonprofit organizations, 1984–94</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.9</td>
<td>Trends in pharmaceutical companies’ R&amp;D, selected countries, 1981–91</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure A5.10 World Bank commitments to health and population, 1981–94 ........ 227
Figure A5.11 Bilateral ODA, 1976–92 (three-year moving averages) .......... 231
Figure A5.12 Bilateral ODA for health and population, 1992 ................ 232
Figure A5.13 Bilateral commitment to health and population as a percentage of total bilateral ODA, 1992 .................. 232
Figure A5.14 ODA trends, 1982–93 .................................. 232

Figure A7.1 Institutions with sustained TDR support (10 or more RCS grant-years) .... 241
Figure A7.2 TDR contributions, obligations and budgets 1976–94 .......... 250
Figure A7.3 TDR's operations budget by disease .......................... 256

Figure A8.1 Standardized priority scores (results of questionnaire) ...... 263

Text tables

Table S.1 The changing pattern of disease burden, demographically developing countries, estimates for 1990 and projections to 2020 .......................................................... xxiv
Table S.2 Per cent of all deaths and disease burden attributable to tobacco, by region, estimates for 1990 and projections for 2020 ................................................. xxv
Table S.3 R&D to address major health problems: suggested emphases of activity, by broad discipline ................................................................. xxxvi

Table 1.1 R&D to address major health challenges: the role of different disciplines .... 5
Table 1.2 Good buys: examples of attractive health interventions in low-income and middle-income countries ................................. 8
Table 1.3 Steps to inform resource allocation: selected examples .... 9

Table 3.1 The burden of childhood disease ........................................ 23
Table 3.2 The burden of disease avoidable if access to safe water and sanitation were universal ........................................ 24
Table 3.3 The burden of disease that could be avoided if malnutrition were eliminated .... 25
Table 3.4 Broad reasons for the persistence of disease burden from the five major childhood killers ........................................... 27
Table 3.5 Comparisons of the likely cost-effectiveness of the package for Integrated Management of the Sick Child in different settings ..................... 28
Table 3.6 Comparisons of the likely cost-effectiveness of two malaria interventions .... 30
Table 3.7 The burden of maternal and perinatal ill-health ......................... 32
Table 3.8 Broad reasons for the persistence of the burden of poor reproductive health .... 33

Table 4.1 Factors in the emergence and re-emergence of infectious diseases .... 35
Table 4.2 Major microbial threats ................................................. 36
Table 4.3 Broad reasons for the persistence of tuberculosis ...................... 39
Table 4.4 Broad reasons for the persistence of pneumococcal disease .... 41
Table 4.5 Broad reasons for the persistence of malaria ....................... 44
Table 4.6 Comparisons of the likely cost-effectiveness in fighting malaria of insecticide-impregnated bednets and a vaccine ................................ 45
Table 4.7 Cost-effectiveness of a potential malaria vaccine ....................... 46
Table 4.8 Broad reasons for the persistence of HIV and other STDs 48
Table 4.9 Additional microbial threats: illustrative examples .............. 52
Table 4.10 Summary of priority interventions for the major microbial threats .... 53

Table 5.1 The burden of psychiatric and neurological conditions, 1990, selected regions ... 59
Table 5.2 Avoidable burden of disease if tobacco use were eliminated, 1990 and 2020 60
Table 5.3 Avoidable burden of disease if alcohol misuse could be eliminated 60
Table 5.4 Association between known risk factors and cardiovascular diseases .... 61
Table 5.5 Broad reasons for the persistence of noncommunicable diseases .... 64
Table 5.6 The growing burdens of violence and car crashes .......................... 69
Table 5.7 Current and projected burden from road-traffic accidents ............... 70
Table 5.8 Current and projected global burden from violence ......................... 71

Table 6.1 The economic benefits of child immunization in the United States .......... 80
Table 6.2 Per capita health spending in OECD countries, selected years, 1980–92 .......... 83
Table 6.3 Elements of the health system ................................................... 84
Table 6.4 Overcoming potential barriers between researchers and decision-makers .......... 89
Box Table 6.2.1 Priorities for global research concerning populations .................. 85
Box Table 6.2.2 Priorities for research concerning households and individuals ............. 86
Box Table 6.3.1 Priorities for research on health policies and health systems ............. 88

Table 7.1 R&D scientists (all disciplines) and engineers by region, 1992 .................. 96
Table 7.2 Percentage share of published papers in health R&D accessible on international databases, 1993 .......................................................... 97
Table 7.3 Production and consumption of pharmaceutical preparations, 1990 .......... 100
Box Table 7.2.1 Cumulative voluntary contributions to two international research programmes, 1970–95 ...................................................... 105

Table AC.1 Countries and areas included in each of the eight regional groupings used in this Report ................................................................. 129
Table AC.2 Demographic characteristics of the regional groupings used in this Report —estimates for 1980 and 1990 and projections for 2020 ........................................... 131

Table A1.1 Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990, leading causes of deaths, years of life lost (YLLs) and DALYs ................................................................. 140
Table A1.2 Causes of DALYs in 1990, by magnitude, world .................................. 141
Table A1.3 Causes of DALYs in 1990, by magnitude, established market economies and formerly socialist economies of Europe ........................................... 143
Table A1.4 Causes of DALYs in 1990, by magnitude, demographically developing countries ................................................................. 145
Table A1.5 Causes of DALYs in 2020, by magnitude, world .................................. 147
Table A1.6 Causes of DALYs in 2020, by magnitude, established market economies and formerly socialist economies of Europe ........................................... 149
Table A1.7 Causes of DALYs in 2020, by magnitude, demographically developing countries ................................................................. 151
Table A1.8 Causes of DALYs in 1990 and 2020, listed alphabetically for world, established market economies and formerly socialist economies of Europe, and demographically developing regions, of 96 conditions ........................................... 153
Table A1.9 Global burden of disease in 1990, disaggregated by region, cause and gender 156
Table A1.10 Global burden of disease in 2020, disaggregated by region, cause and gender 165
Table A1.11 Deaths by cause in 1990, world, established market economies and formerly socialist economies of Europe, and demographically developing countries ........................................... 174
Table A1.12 Projected deaths by cause in 2020, world ........................................... 177
Table A1.13 Projected deaths by cause in 2020, established market economies and formerly socialist economies of Europe ........................................... 180
Table A1.14 Projected deaths by cause in 2020, demographically developing countries .... 183

Table A2.1 Estimated disease burden in 1990 for selected risk factors, by region: for deaths, years of life lost (YLLs), years lived with a disability (YLDs) and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) ........................................... 188
Table A2.2 Deaths in 2020, years of life lost (YLLs), years lived with a disability (YLDs) and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) attributable to tobacco use, by region .... 191
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A3.1</td>
<td>The CGIAR system at a glance</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3.2</td>
<td>CGIAR contributions by donor</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3.3</td>
<td>CGIAR members</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.1</td>
<td>Production and consumption of pharmaceutical preparations, 1990</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.2</td>
<td>The consumption of pharmaceuticals, 1990</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.3</td>
<td>Leading categories of R&amp;D projects worldwide in 1988</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.4</td>
<td>U.S. pharmaceutical R&amp;D expenditures by product class, 1988–89</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.5</td>
<td>Number of INDs in each therapeutic category and per cent of total for period of IND filing accounted for by each category</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.6</td>
<td>Percentage distributions of leading non-injury causes of death, 1990.</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4.7</td>
<td>Percentage distributions of leading non-injury burdens of disease (DALYs), 1990</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.1</td>
<td>Sources of information on government health expenditures</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.2</td>
<td>Estimates of publicly funded health research, 1992</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.3</td>
<td>R&amp;D expenditures by pharmaceutical companies, 1992</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.4</td>
<td>Estimates of publicly funded health R&amp;D, established market economies, 1992</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.5</td>
<td>Health expenditure-weighted burden of disease, world, 1990</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.6</td>
<td>Diseases and health conditions for which 95% or more of the global burden falls on low-income and middle-income countries, 1990</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.7</td>
<td>Diseases or health conditions for which 95% or more of the weighted burden falls on low-income and middle-income countries, 1990</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.8</td>
<td>Research budgets of selected major development agencies, 1992</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.9</td>
<td>Major WHO programmes with an important research component, 1992</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.10</td>
<td>Allocation of ODA for health R&amp;D, 1992</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.11</td>
<td>Public R&amp;D on health problems of low-income and middle-income countries, 1992</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.12</td>
<td>Estimates of expenditures by selected foundations on research on health problems of low-income and middle-income countries, 1992</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.13</td>
<td>Domestic R&amp;D expenditures by pharmaceutical companies, 1981–91</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.14</td>
<td>Rate of increase of domestic R&amp;D expenditures by pharmaceutical companies, 1981–91</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.15</td>
<td>Global R&amp;D funding for selected topics</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.16</td>
<td>Parasitic diseases: new drugs marketed, 1975–89</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5.17</td>
<td>Bilateral ODA, three-year moving averages</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.1</td>
<td>Research capability strengthening grant approval rate: 1993</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.2</td>
<td>Product highlights</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.3</td>
<td>Targets</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.4</td>
<td>First 100 acknowledged funding sources in randomly selected articles on malaria research</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.5</td>
<td>TDR financial contributions (to 31 December 1994)</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.6</td>
<td>Current examples of TDR’s wider scientific and technical collaborations</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.7a</td>
<td>TDR drug development: estimated costs to TDR and its partners, and time frames.</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7.7b</td>
<td>TDR vaccine development: estimated costs to TDR and its partners, and time frames.</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8.1</td>
<td>Response rates by professional training and type of organization</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8.2</td>
<td>Questionnaire results: average rank and proportion of respondents considering topic one of the top five priority areas</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table A8.3 Ten highest priority topics for research concerning populations: simple consensus ranks and ranks after weighting for feasibility, impact and availability of expertise ......................................................... 264

Table A8.4 Some research topics concerning “social roles and their effect on health” suggested by the expert group for the area “Households: families and social roles” .... 267

Table A9.1 Elements of the health system ................................................................. 272
Table A9.2 Background material on health policy and systems development prepared for this review ................................................................. 272
Abbreviations and acronyms

ACHR—Advisory Committee on Health Research
ACTION TB—programme of Glaxo Wellcome
APOC—African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control
ARI—acute respiratory infections (also used to refer to the WHO ARI control programme)
BCG—bactère Calmette-Guérin
CDD—Diarrhoeal Disease Control programme (WHO)
CDR—Division of Diarrhoeal and Acute Respiratory Disease Control (WHO)
CG—Consultative Group
CGIAR—Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
CHRD—Commission on Health Research for Development
CIMMYT—Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo
CIOMS—Council for International Health Organizations of Medical Sciences
CMR—Centre for Medicines Research
COHRED—Council on Health Research for Development
DALY—disability-adjusted life year
DEC—diethylcarbamazine
DOTS—directly observed treatment, short course, for tuberculosis
EHIP—Essential Health Interventions Project (Tanzania)
EMEs—established market economies
ENHR—Essential National Health Research
EPI—Expanded Programme on Immunization
EPI-plus—Expanded Programme on Immunization plus micronutrient supplements and locally relevant antigens
FAO—Food and Agriculture Organization
FDA—Food and Drug Administration
FSE—formerly socialist economies of Europe
GDP—Gross Domestic Product
GPA—Global Programme on AIDS (WHO)
GPV—Global Programme for Vaccines and Immunization
GUF—general university funds
HHMI—Howard Hughes Medical Institute (USA)
HRP—Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (WHO)
IARC—International Agency for Research on Cancer
ICDDR,B—International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
IDRC—International Development Research Centre (Canada)
IFPRI—International Food Policy Research Institute
IHPP—International Health Policy Programme
IHRCs—international health research centres
IMSC—Integrated Management of the Sick Child (also referred to as IMCI, Integrated Management of Childhood Illness, now the official name)
INCAP—Instituto de Nutrición de Centroamérica y Panamá
INCIEN—International Clinical Epidemiology Network
IRRI—International Rice Research Institute
ISNAR—International Service for National Agricultural Research
LAC—Latin America and the Caribbean
MDR—multidrug-resistant
MDT—multidrug therapy
MEC—Middle Eastern crescent
MRC—Medical Research Council (UK)
NCD—noncommunicable disease
NGO—nongovernmental organization
NIAID—National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (USA)
NIH—National Institutes of Health (USA)
NSF—National Science Foundation (USA)
OAI—other Asia and islands
OCP—Onchocerciasis Control Programme
ODA—official development assistance
OECD—Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
ORS—Oral Rehydration Solution
ORSTOM—Iнститут Франçais de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement et Coopération (Note: acronym continues to be used, although it represents the old, no-longer-used name Organisme de Recherche Scientifique des Territoires d’Outre Mer)
ORT—oral rehydration therapy
OTA—Office of Technology Assessment (USA)
PCR—polymerase chain reaction
PEM—protein-energy malnutrition
PMA—Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association
RCS—research capability strengthening
REMO—rapid epidemiological mapping of onchocerciasis
SAMRC—South Africa Medical Research Council (South Africa)
SAREC (Sweden)—Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries
SIC—Standard Industrial Classification
STAC—Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (of TDR)
STD—Science and Technology Development Programme (of the European Union)
STDs—sexually transmitted diseases

*These are regional groupings of countries as used in this Report. Appendix C lists all eight regions and the countries included in them.
TAC—Technical Advisory Committee
TDR—UNDP/World Bank/WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases
UNDP—United Nations Development Programme

UNFPA—United Nations Population Fund
USAID—United States Agency for International Development