

Strengthening health information systems

Reliable and timely information on service delivery and other key indicators is potentially very valuable for health managers at all levels. Furthermore, with the increased focus on the Millennium Development Goals and the need to measure progress towards their achievement, health information systems are receiving more and more attention. The World Health Organisation, the Health Metrics Network and other organisations stress the need for managers and policy makers to base their decisions on good information. They suggest that the public also have a right to be informed of their health status and the availability of services for them.

Yet, despite numerous initiatives to strengthen health information systems in many countries, many of them remain inappropriate, overly-complex and ineffectively targeted. Often people at the top want vast amounts of information collected and reported on regularly from all health facilities. This places very heavy demands on lower levels of a health system, frequently overwhelming the capacity of staff and systems and requiring frontline health workers to spend an inappropriate amount of the time on paper work.

In addition, Health Management Information System (HMIS) are often produced that have procedures, software, forms and other materials that are too complicated for facilities and local services to use, manage or maintain. The result is data that is inaccurately collected and recorded, reporting that is irregular, unreliable information of limited value, low levels of utilisation, and, overall, poorly functioning, fragmented systems and insufficient capacity.

Health Partners International and strengthening health information systems

Health Partners International (HPI) and its partners have been helping to establish *appropriate and practical* Health Management Information Systems (HMIS) in a number of countries. In recent years we have partnered with HISP-SA – the Health Information Systems Programme of South Africa to carry out an important HMIS initiative in Nigeria and another in Zambia, both of which are introducing major changes in organising and *simplifying* existing HMIS. Already in Nigeria there is evidence of significant improvements in the reporting, quality and use of information.

Below we highlight a small selection of other recent work we have undertaken in HMIS:

Strengthening Health Management Information Systems, Nigeria

Problems with data quality undermine planning and assessment activities within the health system in Nigeria. HPI consultants introduced open source district health information system software in five states. This software was developed by HPI's partner HISP in South Africa and is used extensively across low-income countries. The introduction process involved: standardising indicator-based minimum datasets; ratifying facility lists; developing data collection tools; building the capacity of HMIS staff; and data capture. Support is currently being provided for improving the quality of HMIS data; analysing what is in the system; and using the information for planning purposes. All five states have shown significant improvement in data capture, analysis and use.

Strengthening a Health Management Information System, Zambia

Zambia is placing significant emphasis on improving its health systems and reducing poverty. The country's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) emphasises health and has a number of indicators to monitor the health sector in line with the National Health Strategic Plan 2006–2011. The European Union provides substantial funds to Zambia under the Poverty Reduction Budget Support (PRBS) scheme.

To further support the objective of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of health care delivery, HPI was contracted to help Zambia's Ministry of Health (MOH) set up a modern, integrated HMIS database that was flexible, user-friendly and able to handle all necessary data sources. The resultant system combines information on people, equipment and procedures, organised to provide stakeholders with the tools to make timely and informed decisions and use information productively at various levels.

For this project HPI is providing a number of inputs to the MOH. These have included a project coordinator, a procurement specialist who developed the technical specifications for the database, and a training specialist who trained and assisted in the development of pre-service and in-service training.