

Science at WHO and UNICEF: the corrosion of trust

This week, *The Lancet* publishes two papers of critical interest to child survival. Unfortunately, both have stirred concerns about misuse of data by UN agencies. Here, we review the allegations and try to draw lessons about the place of independent scientific inquiry in the arena of global health policymaking.

Greg Fegan and colleagues report the success of an expanded insecticide-treated bednet programme in Kenya. The full paper reveals the strengths and limitations of the study, and provides important estimates of uncertainty. No such statistical caution was expressed in the WHO statement about these data, released on Aug 16. Indeed, WHO claimed that this finding “ends the debate about how to deliver long-lasting insecticidal nets”. Yet communications between the Kenyan research team and WHO suggest an ill-considered rush by WHO against the advice of wiser scientific minds.

In early August, the Kenyan team and WHO exchanged views about the results of this trial “on a confidential basis”. The investigators expected Ministry officials to disseminate their findings. But the scientific team planned to remain silent until their data had acquired the “legitimacy” of publication. They had WHO’s agreement to do the same. But WHO broke its promise. The agency released a confident press statement without even having the courtesy to inform the Kenyan scientists of their plans.

WHO officials have implied that waiting for peer-reviewed publication of programmatic data is “obstructive”. The conventions of scientific communication get in the way of an important news story. To be sure, the case for mass distribution of insecticide-treated bednets is strengthening. Those who defend the selling of nets or their social marketing have a weakening evidence base to draw on. But when the data and their interpretation are more complex than a press release can convey, the sensible approach is to wait. The agency statement can then be read alongside fully reported research findings. WHO’s precipitate move to comment without reference to the full facts was reckless.

In a separate collaboration between the new Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, WHO, and Universities at Harvard and Queensland, Chris Murray and colleagues report disappointing progress in efforts to reduce child mortality. Although work to accelerate child survival has been scaled up in recent years, it is too soon to be sure

of its success. Prior to receiving the paper by Murray and colleagues, *The Lancet* had received signals from UNICEF that competition in global monitoring of child survival risked damaging valuable interagency collaboration. We consulted widely but the private independent advice we received was overwhelmingly to publish. Why? Because the work was seen as a useful additional accountability tool not only for countries, but also for UN agencies. We sent Murray’s paper to UNICEF for its comments. We shared with them the publication date.

In December each year UNICEF publishes its *State of the World’s Children* report. That publication regularly carries with it an estimate of global child mortality. But on Sept 10—6 days after we informed UNICEF of the publication date of the paper by Murray and colleagues—and in a break with its usual practice, UNICEF contacted selected journalists about “a major public health success”. For the first time UNICEF strongly publicised its claim that annual under-5 child deaths had fallen below 10 million.

Several journalists were puzzled. The sudden UNICEF contact was unexpected. It was unusually dissociated from UNICEF’s annual report. There were no detailed data for journalists to examine in order to interpret UNICEF’s claim. UNICEF denies that it released the positive 9.7 million figure to pre-empt the more critical tone of the paper by Murray and colleagues. But a senior UNICEF adviser did tell *The Lancet* that Murray’s work was “ethically troubling” and that “we can’t say that we were unhappy to have released our figure first”.

Both of these examples show how UN agencies are willing to play fast and loose with scientific findings in order to further their own institutional interests. When those interests are the preventable deaths of children, perhaps one should forgive their haste. Certainly we share WHO’s sense of urgency about translating research into policy. And we support strongly UNICEF’s view that scientists should work together to improve systems for tracking child survival.

But the danger is that by appearing to manipulate science, breach trust, resist competition, and reject accountability, WHO and UNICEF are acting contrary to responsible scientific norms that one would have expected UN technical agencies to uphold. Worse, they risk inadvertently corroding their own long-term credibility. ■ *The Lancet*

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