

Healthcare infrastructure matters!

Andrei Issakov discusses the pivotal role played by the health system's physical resources. How can they be better managed? First column in a new series



A mother walks 15 kilometres to the nearest health centre; her feverish child lies limp in her arms. Once at the centre, the doctor makes a diagnosis of malaria, although this is just a guess as his microscope is broken. He prescribes an anti-malarial, but the essential drug is out of stock. The delivery was due last week, but transport was unavailable. The dispenser tries once again to contact the central medical stores on the two-way radio, but the equipment doesn't work. So, the clinic is in fact unable to do anything to relieve the child's illness, and discouraged mother returns to her village to seek the advice of the traditional healer.

This is a recurring scenario in many African countries, particularly at primary and first referral levels of healthcare delivery system.

Health system's physical resources play a pivotal role in delivering health services to the population and improving people's health. They provide the material platform on which the delivery of care rests, and constitute the basis and framework for the provision of all health interventions. They also consume the bulk of a country's health budget.

Large capital sums are continually spent on construc-

tion of new facilities and purchase of new equipment that fail because these capital investments are poorly planned or do not match health needs or the health system's capacity to manage them throughout their entire life cycle. They are also not mirrored by the imposition of related policies, strategies, institutional and technical capacity building, or adequate recurrent budget provision to properly utilise and sustain them. Instead of realising a promise of great potential benefits associated with an expansion of infrastructure and introduction of new technologies, they become a heavy burden with which health systems in many countries are not able to cope.

Not only are precious resources wasted, but this poor decision making actively leads to staff demotivation and desertion. It also harms patients.

There is a large body of analysis of problems associated with physical resources and technologies, and a huge reserve of proposed solutions to particular challenges, and practices known to work in various settings. While some countries have made progress, many have not, and a range of common problems persist.

In future issues of the *Africa Health* journal, this column will be a lively discussion on a variety of issues constituting a domain of healthcare infrastructure management, and its role and place within the broad health systems and services context. We shall discuss policy and governance, organisation and management of healthcare technical services, needs assessment and planning tools, procurement and donation strategies, roles and responsibilities of technical staff at facility level, and many other topics of common interest and concern. The column will also take us on an exciting safari through the continent to share the country experiences, learn lessons from successes and failures, get information on regional capacity building opportunities, and just to know each other better and be able to network with colleagues.

So, pick up future issues of *Africa Health* to find out more on what can be done to overcome the persistent challenges in bringing infrastructure and technology to bear positively on priority health needs and problems.

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From 1985 to August 2009, he worked with the World Health Organization Headquarters in Geneva, including last 10 years as Coordinator for Health Facilities, Service Provision and Technology Planning. In 1986, he initiated the WHO global programme on health systems physical infrastructure and technology management which he led until his retirement, and which has been instrumental in building a sound global knowledge base, strengthening developing countries' capacity for health technology and facilities planning, assessment and management, convening a number of landmark international forums on the subject, and in establishing a worldwide network of institutions and individuals working in this area.