

Social justice and equity for health in Africa

Elsie Kiguli-Malwadde reports on the highlights of the 2021 Virtual AFREhealth symposium.

The fourth African Forum for Research and Education in Health (AFREhealth) symposium was held virtually, 4-6 August 2021. The previous year's symposium was postponed because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. AFREhealth leadership acknowledged that these are unprecedented times and decided that 2021 symposium would be a virtual event. The event was hosted by the Addis Ababa University with the theme 'Social Justice and Equity for Health in Africa'.

The subthemes included:

1. Socially Accountable Health Professions Education, Governments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International agencies
2. Epidemiological transition and disease burden of COVID -19, Non-Communicable diseases (NCDs), HIV and Tuberculosis (TB)
3. Research approaches to assess impact and quality improvement in health education
4. Service delivery – enhancing Interprofessional Education (IPE)/interventions to improve patient outcomes and health security,

The three-day event was attended by 259 participants from 19 countries; 15 African and 4 non-African countries (Afghanistan, Netherlands, Canada and USA). The conference was categorised into plenary, breakout, poster and satellite sessions. The conference was preceded by a Governing Council meeting and an Annual General Meeting. There were 12 plenary speakers, 7 from Africa and 5 from outside Africa. There were 52 Abstract presenters, 37 gave oral presentations while 15 presented posters. All these were video recorded and can be found at the AFREhealth website: <https://afrehealth.org/2021symposium/programme>.

Some of the key highlights of the sessions included:

- The need to engage with all stakeholders (students, governments, NGOs, communities) when planning health professions education to help identify priorities and important issues to the communities to be served was emphasised. The focus on community needs was stressed as well as the importance of sharing evidence and outcomes from health professional schools that are socially accountable.
- The need for competency-based curricula was noted but also highlighted were the challenges of implementing and evaluating them. The need for accreditation to ensure quality of education was discussed.
- Social accountability was identified as an important ingredient so as to have organised and capable

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public groups, responsible governments, access to information and increased sensitivity to culture and context.

- Successful containment of COVID-19 is heavily dependent on adequate diagnosis, efficient screening of the populations and preventive measures including vaccinations.
- The COVID 19 response has been more challenging in Africa due to the already existing pandemics like HIV, TB and NCDs as well as congestion. Death of health professionals made the already existing human resources for health shortage worse while fear, ignorance about the disease and the lack of vaccines compounded the situation.
- The unprecedented and unexpected emergence of a pandemic has ignited innovations like multi country research studies, remote learning, alternative ways of delivering health care such as telemedicine and home-based care and increased collaboration with international partners as well as highlighted the need for prioritising public health.
- The importance for collaborative research was highlighted. It was noted that it is complex, because it requires the alignment of participants towards a common purpose and a community of practice so as to break down the professional boundaries.

On the last day of the conference three virtual satellite sessions were held. The first was convened by the AFREhealth Health Professions Education Research and Inter-Professions Education technical working groups. It introduced participants to the functions and core mandate of the groups and encouraged individuals interested in them to join. The second was convened by the AFREhealth–Consortium of Universities for Global Health Working Group and addressed ways forward for the collaboration. It featured a keynote speech on the global health workforce crisis by Jim Campbell, Director, Health Workforce Department at the WHO. The third session was convened by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates–Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research, which presented its key priorities for Africa: health professions education, accreditation of medical training, health care education resources, quality assurance of health work force, and clinical exchanges. All these sessions were well attended.

In conclusion, the first ever virtual AFREhealth symposium was an exciting event that run well and presented an opportunity for sharing, mutual learning and communication of ideas across the continent and globally.