

**National Health Research System
(NHRS) Mapping
in Ten Eastern Mediterranean Countries**

Tunisia

**EMRO - COHRED - GCC
2006**

Introduction

This document provides the responses to a mapping of the National Health Research System (NHRS) of Tunisia. The mapping took place as part of a joint effort between WHO EMRO, COHRED and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to inform future actions to strengthening health research governance and management in ten Mediterranean countries.

This assessment intended to build a descriptive picture of the national health research systems in four key areas:

- A. Governance and management of the National Health Research System
- B. Institutions engaged in research for health
- C. Key stakeholders involved in research for health
- D. Available literature and data review

In Tunisia information was provided by Professor Hassen Ghannem, Director of the Department of Epidemiology of the University Hospital Farhat Hached of Sousse and Dr Nouredine Bouzouaia, General Director of Public Health of the Ministry of Health.

Further information is available in papers:

- *National Health Research System Mapping in Ten Eastern Mediterranean Countries – A Summary*, produced by the WHO-EMRO – COHRED – GCC NHRS Collaborative Group.
- *Making Health Research Work: A manual for national health research system development - outline*, produced by COHRED.

You can also visit the link: <http://www.cohred.org/NHRSupport/>

A. GOVERNANCE and MANAGEMENT of THE NATIONAL HEALTH RESEARCH SYSTEM (NHRS)

1. Health research governance structure in the country

In Tunisia, there are different structures involved in health research governance:

- The Ministry of Scientific Research, Technology and Competence Development has in charge to propose and to execute the government's policy in the sector of scientific research, technological innovation and competence development. Besides its direct tutelage on the structures that are under its competence, it assures some assignments of horizontal character that aims to promote research in all sectors
- The Superior Council of research, chaired by the Prime Minister, who has for role to give the big orientations of research in the country, also exists. The Superior Council is composed by representatives of the different ministries involved with research; its role is to give main orientations on research in the country. At each ministry, the research policy is under the responsibility of the Minister. There is a formal governance around the superior council.
- The Ministry of Public Health has created a direction (within the General Direction of Health) that takes care of research in the domain of health, whose mission is to promote research in the sector and to assure its follow-up and its assessment
- The Ministry of Higher Education, through the General Direction of Scientific Research and Technological Renovation, takes care of research in the structures of higher education.
- The Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources also takes care of agricultural research particularly in the domain of animal health and food security.

2. Management of the NHRS (structure(s), position(s) or organisation(s) involved)

The management of Health Research is under different intervening parties:

- The Direction of Medical Research of the Ministry of Health that takes care of research in the structures under the tutelage of the Ministry as the hospitals and the specialized institutes.
- The Ministry of Scientific Research, Technology and Competence Development that acts in a horizontal way to promote research in all sectors and that finances research in the health establishments.
- The Ministry of Higher Education (the general direction of scientific research and technological renovation) that finances research in the establishments of higher education, in this case the faculties of Medicine, Pharmacy and Dental Medicine

3. Existence of an 'office' for research within the Ministry of Health

In its organization chart, the Ministry of Health has a Direction of medical research, created since 2000, connected to the General Direction of Health. It has for mission to orient, in coordination with the Ministry of Research, the priorities of the medical research, to promote the creation and the

development of research units and research laboratories, to assure the follow-up, the assessment and the coordination of research activities, to contribute to identify the sources of financing and to promote and develop the possibilities of partnership on a national and international scale. It is directed currently by an assistant manager under the tutelage of the General Director of Health.

4. Existence of an 'office' or officials for health / health sector / health research within the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Science & Technology

- A person responsible for health sector exists at the Ministry of the Finances.
- At the Ministry of Scientific Research, Technology and Competence Development, that finance the structures of research created in the health establishments, the General Director of the Scientific Research takes care of research in the domain of health in coordination with the assistant manager of the medical research.
- At the Ministry of Higher Education, the General Director of scientific research and technological renovation takes care of health research in these establishments.

5. National Health Research Policy

The Ministry of Health has a plan of development of the medical research, which was elaborated since the creation of the research direction. It consists in the progressive creation, in coordination with the Ministry the Scientific Research, Technology and Competence Development, of research structures in health establishments. It is about research laboratories and research units. These structures, once created are submitted to a follow-up and a periodic assessment of their activities. The creation of the research structures continues at a sustained rhythm every year with an average of 20 units and 3 to 4 laboratories every 2 years. It doesn't limit itself to the academic structures, having tradition of research, but spreads progressively toward the non academic structures, such as the regional hospitals.

This plan is integrated in the global plan of economic and social development of the country. The research activity is under the responsibility of the researcher but its assessment is under the responsibility of the ministry. The objective is to strengthen the research capacity of the country.

6. National Health Priorities

The Ministry of Public Health fixes and reviews its priorities every 5 years, in the frame of a national plan of development and written in an official document, in conformity with the national and international data. The priorities fixed for 2007-2011 concern:

- reinforcement of reproductive health results, family health and demographic policy.
- preservation of the sanitary security capacity and reinforcement of the surveillance system and disease control
- control of non communicable diseases
- improvement of health of high risk groups and people with particular problems
- development of capacities to assure drugs safety, the vaccines and needs of blood transfusion
- human resource promotion
- control of health budget growth and the development of the health system

7. National Health Research Priorities

Currently, there are no lists of health research priorities. The researchers themselves choose the themes of research. However, the relevance of the research theme in relation to the sanitary policy is an important element in the initial assessment of the research units before their creation.

8. Legislation dealing with health research

There is no Health Research Legislation in the country. Some texts of law exist relative to research as a whole such as:

- the law of research orientation (law n° 6 from January 31, 1996),
- the decrees of the Prime Minister from June 11, 1998 fixing the criteria of eligibility to the statute of laboratory and unit research.
- the decree n° 2005-336 from February 16, 2005 establishing some roles of Ministry of Scientific Research, Technology and Competence in the promotion of research in all sectors

In the health domain:

- the decree of the Minister of Health from July 22, 1999, fixed the criteria of eligibility to the statute of research unit in the public sanitary structures.
- the decree of the Ministry of Public Health n° 2000-2357 from October 17, 2000, that creates a direction, within the General Direction of Health, for the promotion of research in the sector and to assure its follow-up and its assessment

9. Stated values for the NHRS

The national system of medical research has a set of values for research:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ethical: a national committee of ethics that has for mission is to look after the respect of ethics in the domain of health exists especially for research in health. Some local boards of ethics also exist in the sanitary establishments. The research projects are submitted to the opinions and approval of the ethics committees.• Excellence : research is considered like a sign of excellence. Only the projects answering the quality criteria are financed by the research system. Otherwise, standards of ethics and quality exist at all levels of the medical practice.• Equity and Fairness: research aims to solve the problem of fairness with respect to health and that, by some research projects of a particular character such as the project of research federated on the handicap, currently in progress. |
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10. Stated aims of the NHRS

Health research aims first to the promotion of health, the resolution of health problems and to develop the health system to better face the present and future health problems. The system is composed of a set of research structures i.e.laboratories and the units of research. These structures are financed to assure the research activities. The researchers there exercising are civil servants of the Ministry of Public Health, most often, health professionals supported by scientists of different specialties. Research activities are undertaken either in the hospitals or in the faculties, and less frequently in the private sector.

11. Monitoring and evaluation of the NHRS

Research is under the control of a follow-up and assessment system. Two structures of assessment exist:

- at the governmental level: a yearly report, gathering the different Ministry reports, is presented to the Superior Council of Research. It is a governmental look on research.
- at the level of the research structures that are submitted to a system of follow-up and assessment. The mission of assessment of the activities of the research laboratories is confided to a national committee of assessment of the research activities; the research units activities assessment is assured by the Ministry of Public Health.

Three stages of assessment have been identified:

- an initial assessment at the submission of the candidacy for the creation of the research unit or the research laboratory
- a mid-course assessment according to an activity report produced by the responsible of the research structure
- a final assessment at the end of the mandate of the structure to evaluate the opportunity to continue to finance the activities

12. Ethical review process or structures for health research

The respect of ethics is an important value of the system. Next to the national committee of ethics, some local committees exist in the sanitary structures. In fact, All the research institutions have their own committees and all research projects are submitted to the opinions of the ethics committees before acceptance, including the projects entering in the setting of the international cooperation.

13. Existence of a mechanism(s) to increase the utilisation of research results by policy makers, managers, practitioners, public.

The use of the research results is not institutionalized. However, the diffusion of the results is undertaken on the occasion of forums organized by the governmental or non governmental organisms and by the publications in the scientific magazines. Researchers often, also produce reports to the decision-makers on their main results in order to elaborate adapted strategies of intervention. Researchers themselves promote their findings directly while adopting and improving their ways of managing health problems.

14. Existence of mechanism(s) to keep health policy makers informed of research advancement

There are no structures or specific mechanisms assigned to inform the Ministry on the state of research advancement worldwide. However, different researchers, each of which in his/her domain, are follow this state of advancement and propose projects of research in this sense

15. Dissemination system for research findings

There are no structures responsible for the diffusion of research results to the public. However, several media are interested in research and technological development and propose to the public some press

articles or radio or TV broadcasts on the progress of research in the country. The country also has a city of sciences opened to the public and dedicated to the popularization of research.

16. Involvement of media organisations in the dissemination of research for health

There is no official role to media in research. Several intervene in a prompt way to inform the public of research and its findings.

17. Monitoring and evaluation of the impact of new health policies or interventions

The technical directions of the Health Ministry have the responsibility to follow the evolution of research and its impact, while elaborating programs of health or while adapting the programs of health to the novelties coming from research.

18. System for collecting, analysing, and reporting of routine health information

The health information system is based on the obligatory declaration of illnesses by the physicians and the biologists in both the public and private sectors. The declaration is addressed in 2 copies to the regional and central level. This system is completed by monthly reports for some infectious or chronic diseases. A sentry and seasonal surveillance is assured for some illnesses (flu, diarrhoea, conjunctivitis, etc). Population registers are elaborated for cancers, road traffic accidents, and lately cardiovascular diseases. This system is available for the hospital activities, school health and the environment. The collaboration with the other sectors provides the data on animal health, vectors and the environment. The feedback is assured by yearly reports or quarterly bulletins ...

19. Regulation of the introduction of new health technologies, including drugs

Drugs are allowed in the market only after authorization. This authorization is received after presentation of file and submission to the opinion of a special commission. Vaccines, biological products and medical devices are submitted to the same procedures.

The acquisition of equipment is also submitted to a special commission constituted of specialist technicians and administrators.

The country also has the following structures of control :

- the national laboratory of drugs control that has for mission to control the quality of the medicines introduced in Tunisia,
- the national agency of sanitary and environmental control of products,
- le centre national de radioprotection.

B. Institutions engaged in ‘research for health’

Institution	Commission	Conduct
(a) Government departments and agencies		
Ministry of Public Health	YES	YES
Ministry of Scientific Research, Technology and Competence Development	YES	YES
Ministry of Higher Education	YES	YES
Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources	YES	YES
(b) Health care system		
Specialized Institutes : Pasteur Institute of Tunis, National Institute of Public Health, National Institute of neurology, National Institute of Nutrition and Food Technology	NO	YES
Universitary Hospitals	NO	YES
(c) Higher education and (national) research institutes / laboratories		
Faculties of Medicine of Tunis, Sousse, Monastir et Sfax	NO	YES
Faculty of Dental Medicine of Monastir	NO	YES
Faculty of Pharmacy of Monastir	NO	YES
(d) <u>Private non-profit</u> organisations involved in research for health		
The medical societies are rather oriented toward the formation and the scientific information than toward research		
(e) Business enterprise or industry (<u>Private for-profit</u>)		
Laboratories of pharmaceutical industries	YES	YES
(f) International research and development sponsors or partners involved in research for health		
WHO		
UNICEF		
FNUAP/ UNDP		
INSERM (France)		
European Commission		
(g) Other institutions / commissions / structures / councils / networks / with impact on the activities of NHRS		
NO		

C. Key stakeholders involved in ‘research for health’ in the country

- Pasteur Institute of Tunis,
- National Institute of Neurology
- National Institute of Public Health
- The 4 faculties of Medicine
- Faculty of Pharmacy
- Faculty of Dental Medicine

D. Available literature and data review on ‘research for health’ in the country

- epidemiological data provided by the Direction of basic care
- population data provided by the National institute of Statistics
- different national surveys
- activities reports of different structures
- bibliometric studies
- publications in specialized magazines