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Original Research

Health needs and public health functions addressed in scientific publications in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa

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SUMMARY

Objective: To describe the reporting of public health research in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa (FSA).

Study design: A bibliometric research study of scientific public health publications in FSA, which includes 24 countries and approximately 260 million people.

Methods: Two researchers analysed original articles published in 2007 in the medical or social sciences fields and indexed in Scopus. At least one co-author of articles had to be based in FSA. The analysis focused on research field, public health function (WHO classification), FSA country author's affiliation, language, journal type and global burden of disease (WHO classification).

Results: Of 1047 articles retrieved by the search, 212 were from the public health field. The number of articles per country varied from 0 to 36. Public health functions examined were health service research (24.5%), health monitoring (27.4%), prevention (15%) and legislation (0.5%). The distribution of health needs described in the articles was close to that of the WHO data for Africa for 2004: infectious and parasitic diseases (70% vs 54%), maternal and perinatal conditions (15% vs 17%), non-communicable diseases (15.6% vs 21%), and injuries (0.5% vs 8%).

Conclusion: The areas reported in published articles from sub-Saharan Africa reflect the health needs distribution in Africa; however, the number of publications is low, particularly for prevention. In light of the current focus on evidence-based public health, this study questions whether the international scientific community adequately considers the expertise and perspectives of African researchers and professionals.

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Introduction

Public health research contributes to a better comprehension of health determinants and to the development of preventive or curative interventions. Scientific publication in a peer-reviewed journal is the natural outcome of all research activity, promoting dissemination of scientific and professional knowledge.

In 2006, 90% of the world's scientific production came from three main areas:¹ the European Union (EU), 33% of publications; North America, 30% and Asia, 22%. Only 1.2% of world publications came from Africa, whose population is approximately twice that of the EU, with 0.3% from sub-Saharan Africa, excluding South-Africa. In 1997, Francophone sub-Saharan Africa produced only 12% of the scientific publications from Africa.²

Such statistics illustrate the gap between Europe or North America and Africa in terms of scientific research. It was wondered whether the situation was similar in the public health field. The state of public health research in Europe is well known, thanks to a bibliometric overview within the collaborative study SPHERE (*Strengthening Public Health Research in Europe*).³

The scientific public health publications from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa (FSA), a cultural zone including 24 countries and covering an estimated 260 million people, was analyzed by bibliometric study.

Methods

Identification of articles

Public health publications published in 2007 in the Scopus database (<http://www.scopus.com/home.url>) were identified. Scopus was chosen because this database covers a wider journal range (more than 18,000 journals indexed) than other internationally recognized databases (<http://www.fasebj.org/content/22/2/338.long>) and because of its multidisciplinary nature (articles of public health can be published in fields other than biomedical, especially social sciences). All original articles (excluding literature reviews, letters and editorials) that were published in the health sciences, human and social sciences or

life sciences fields; in any language; with at least one of the co-authors from FSA (search strategy described in Table 1) were included. Articles without abstracts were excluded.

Selection of articles

Selected articles needed to concern one of the public health functions defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and used in the SPHERE study.⁴ Each article was classified as concerning health monitoring (subdivided into monitoring health and disease or health determinants), health services research, prevention, or legislation. The health services research category was wide-ranging and included analysis of health care systems, planning, quality, costs, health policy and access to health care. Prevention covered health education, health promotion, health communication, health policy, health program, action on the environment, chemical prevention, screening, immunization and treatment of addictions. Legislation involved analysis of public health law and regulation. As compared with laboratory or clinical (patient-related) health research, public health research is undertaken at the population level, so articles related to clinical research were excluded (Fig. 1).

Content analysis

Two of the authors (JB, FA) read the titles and abstracts of articles to determine whether they were related to public health, then assigned the categories of the research to the selected articles. In case of disagreement in the classification, a common third reading was made to establish consensus. The number of public health research publications for each FSA country was estimated. Data were collected on public health functions, health needs, authors' affiliation, and publication language.

For each article, only one function of the WHO classification was identified and used by the SPHERE study.⁴ Health needs were classified in terms of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) as established by the WHO.⁵ Mortality, morbidity and disability data are combined into a single measure of disease burden known as DALYs. The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) project provides estimates of the burden of disease worldwide and at the country level. The GBD conditions are organized into four levels. The articles were classified by the first level, which contains four categories: 1) communicable diseases, maternal

Table 1 – Literature search filters for public health articles.

Connector	Field	Parameter
And	Subject of research	('MEDI') OR ('SOC') OR 'PHAR') OR ('IMMU') OR ('MULT') OR ('NEUR') OR ('NURS') OR ('HEAL') OR ('PSYC') OR ('MULT')
	Affiliation	(comores) OR (comoros) OR (maurice) OR (mauritus) OR (seychelles) OR ('cap vert') OR ('cape verde') OR (mauritanie) OR (mauritania) OR (mali) OR (niger) OR (tchad) OR (chad) OR (senegal) OR ('burkina faso') OR (benin) OR (guinée) OR (guinea) OR ('cote d'ivoire') OR ('ivory coast') OR ('republique centrafricaine') OR ('central african republic') OR (togo) OR (cameroun) OR (cameroon) OR ('guinée équatoriale') OR ('equatorial guinea') OR ('republique democratique du congo') OR ('democratic republic congo') OR (gabon) OR (congo) OR (rwanda) OR (burundi) OR (djibouti) OR (madagascar)
And	Publication year	2007
And	Publication type	Article
And Not	Publication type	Review, letters, editorials
And	Language	All

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