MSF OPERATIONAL RESEARCH

Bridging the gap between research and practice
Conducting research in MSF – Why?

MSF provides medical assistance to vulnerable populations living in difficult and resource-limited settings, where models of care and interventions need to be adapted to the setting, and where there is often a need for strong advocacy to improve medical care. MSF programs need a system of regular monitoring, evaluation and reporting on how interventions are implemented and what is their performance over time. Operational research is a tool through which this can be done.

It can be used to identify gaps in access to care, or to assess the feasibility of models of care and the effectiveness of new interventions or tools. It is designed to help health workers to find context-adapted solutions for their patients.

This research also provides valuable evidence when MSF bears witness to the plight of vulnerable populations and advocates with local, national or international institutions to change healthcare practices and policies.
What is operational research?

It is the science of doing better. Operational research (OR) provides an opportunity to demonstrate “what works” and “what needs to be improved” in healthcare programs. As such, it allows us to foster innovation by challenging the status quo, and be accountable to ourselves, our patients and our donors. MSF embraces OR to document and learn from its program experience and improve patient care.

Most often, operational research involves the collection and analysis of available health system or program data to determine how policy and practice should be improved.

Key elements of OR:
› Identify constraints in a program that hamper access to- or quality of care
› Build research questions around these constraints
› Collect and analyze routine program data to answer these questions
› Formulate feasible and applicable solutions
› Write up the results for publication and dissemination

The results of MSF research can be used in several different ways:

1. Program implementation and management
2. Local, national, international
3. Prevention, diagnostics and treatment procedures
Publication and dissemination

Publication is a key part of research dissemination, which is essential for sharing knowledge and translating research into practice and policy. Publication of OR in peer-reviewed journals is also a quality control standard, the credibility of which is important to enhance advocacy on practice and policy.

In 2013, the Operational centre Brussels of MSF published and co-authored over a hundred peer-reviewed articles.

Other forums for research dissemination include the annual MSF Operational Research Day, presentation at the MSF Scientific Day, the Epicentre Annual Meeting and other conferences, the operational research newsletter and the MSF Field Research website (www.fieldresearch.msf.org). This international website provides over 1400 MSF-authored scientific publications free of registration and charge, allowing health professionals worldwide to access research that may be useful for their own healthcare programs. On average of 15000 articles are downloaded per month¹.

OR studies are carried in various fields:

Maternal and child health

Infectious diseases (HIV/Aids, Tuberculosis, malaria...)

Neglected diseases (chagas, kala-azar...)

¹ Data from 2014
Capacity-building

The MSF – Union operational research training was launched in 2009 in partnership with the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union). The courses are formally recognized by the World Health Organization and are part of a global partnership called SORT-IT (Structured Operational Research Training Initiative).

The MSF-Union courses are conducted annually in Africa, Central America, Asia and Europe.

The training model adopts a “learning by doing” approach to teach health workers to conduct and publish OR. Participants progress from writing the study protocol to submitting a manuscript to a scientific journal, with the support of experienced mentors.

“This course has been invaluable as it successfully demystified the process involved in carrying out operational research. As a result, it has given me the confidence that I needed to be able to conduct future research in health programmes.”

Rishma Maini, Luxembourg training 2012-2013
LuxOR stands for Luxembourg Operational Research, an MSF team dedicated to operational research and capacity-building for operational research (OR).

LuxOR activities fall into three main areas:

› Conduct and support MSF staff with operational research studies
› Coordinate and teach OR training courses
› Assist the field with in medical data collection and tools

Operational research fellows, who have been trained in the MSF-Union courses, are based in several countries. They conduct and support and conduct a number of operational research studies per year, facilitate at OR training courses worldwide, and stimulate innovation and expansion of operational research in their own countries and programs.

“With MSF providing medical assistance to some of the most vulnerable populations in the world, the added value that operational research can bring in terms of improving the way we deliver patient care is enormous. As part of this team, we not only drive research implementation, but inspire and teach others to do the same within and outside of MSF.”

Katherine Tayler-Smith,
MSF LuxOR researcher

The team

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Sexual violence in post-conflict Liberia: survivors and their care

**CONTEXT**
In Monrovia, three clinics offer care for survivors of sexual violence.

**IMPACT ON THE FIELD**
- Development of guidelines for managing minors affected by sexual violence
- New terminology introduced related to acts of sexual violence
- Discussion with partners: how to access male survivors?

**QUESTION**
How appropriate is the MSF approach to sexual violence in this context?

**OBJECTIVE**
To describe characteristics of survivors and the pattern, the medical consequences and management of sex violence.

**ANSWER**
The package of care is not adapted to children and misses out minors and male adults.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**
- Adapt the current approach to better meet survivors’ needs
- Expand awareness and advocacy programs
- Adapt terminology and definitions linked to sexual violence

**OBSERVATION ON THE FIELD**
Package of care is designed for adult women, but many survivors are children and men.

**DISSEMINATION**
- Publish in peer-reviewed journal
- Present at conferences
- Available at www.fieldresearch.msf.org

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FIND OUT MORE
Operational Research Day
The annual OR Day presents results of MSF field research and opens discussion and reflection on how to improve health interventions.

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