Investigating Reproductive Tract Infections and other Gynaecological Disorders

Reproductive tract infections and other gynaecological disorders among women represent an enormous global health burden. This significant new book will help focus research on an important though neglected area. The primary aims of the book are to provide an overview of reproductive tract infections and other gynaecological disorders, to highlight the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with undertaking research on this subject, and to serve as a reference for future research in this area. The book focuses on developing country settings, and recognises that gathering this sort of information requires a multidisciplinary and culturally sensitive approach. Findings from the research described in this book will undoubtedly assist physicians, social scientists, epidemiologists and public health practitioners in evaluating the magnitude of this problem within the community at large and in identifying new potentially effective medical and behavioural interventions to address this problem.
Investigating Reproductive Tract Infections and other Gynaecological Disorders
A Multidisciplinary Research Approach

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Foreword

Until the 1990s, interest in exploring women's experiences of reproductive and other gynaecological disorders was limited. The pioneering works of Abhay and Rani Bang in India, Judith Wasserheit in Bangladesh and Huda Zurayk, Hind Khattab and Nabil Younis in Egypt were among the handful of community-based studies that had attempted to explore this subject using both self-reported as well as clinically-diagnosed and laboratory-detected measures of morbidity. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development marked a radical change in global interest in the topic – it argued for a more comprehensive focus on women's reproductive health, including, specifically, reproductive tract infections and other gynaecological morbidities, and boosted interest in filling gaps in what is known about the prevalence and patterns of reproductive tract infections and what they mean for women's health and well-being.

As a result, there has been a rapidly expanding number of research studies on the prevalence and correlates of reproductive tract infections, or gynaecological morbidity more generally. The experiences of these studies have raised a number of concerns. An analytic framework to guide research was missing. hugely variable estimates of morbidity were reported both between studies in similar settings and even within a single study depending on the methodology used, making interpretation difficult. Factors underlying morbidity and the health-seeking patterns of symptomatic women remained unexplored, and serious ethical issues were raised. Despite the interest in conducting multidisciplinary research on the topic, the field has thus far lacked a clear and systematic set of guidelines for the planning and conduct of research that addresses the clinical as well as behavioural and social aspects of women's gynaecological disorders, the contexts in which these occur, their antecedents and consequences, and the insights they provide for programme development.

It was the recognition of these gaps and limitations in the current state of evidence on women's reproductive tract infections and other gynaecological disorders that prompted a partnership between the UNDP/UNFPA/WHO/World Bank Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (HRP), the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation to
undertake a multidisciplinary project intended to shed light on optimal research approaches to the study of this complex topic. This volume is the culmination of that effort.

Investigating Reproductive Tract Infections and Other Gynaecological Disorders fills an important need. It disentangles the complexities of conducting research on this topic, and offers researchers a sound, evidence-based assessment of optimal research approaches to the study of reproductive tract infections and other gynaecological disorders. Recognizing the need for a multidisciplinary nature of any investigation on women's reproductive morbidity, the book incorporates the perspectives of different disciplines, with representation from the social, biomedical and statistical spheres. It presents comprehensive strategies and methods for the design of multidisciplinary research and makes researchers aware of the advantages and limitations of, and complementarities between, various research methods and the imperative of involving the communities being studied in the research. It sets out definitions of the reproductive tract infections and other types of gynaecological morbidity that are usually studied, and it describes methodological approaches that enable more refined estimates of the prevalence of self-reported, clinically-diagnosed and laboratory-detected morbidity. The book also offers a conceptual framework for the study of behavioural determinants and consequences for women's lives, gender issues and the special obstacles impeding women from seeking timely and appropriate care, and for future explorations of the role of men. It highlights the need to go beyond numbers and use qualitative methods to enrich what is known about the context in which women's gynaecological morbidity occurs. Importantly, it discusses analytical approaches that assist the reader in assimilating and interpreting the findings from data collected from a multitude of different sources (qualitative and quantitative, clinical and laboratory). Finally, the volume draws out implications arising from the emerging research agenda for programmes and interventions.

Rigorously researched, the book conveys the complexities required of solid research and dispels any misconceptions that research on reproductive tract infection and other gynaecological disorders is simple, quick or easy to conduct. It is clear that this volume is not intended to be an introductory research text. Rather, it is intended for those with formal training in the social, bio-medical or epidemiological sciences and for those who are experienced in the conduct of health research and are interested in engaging in multidisciplinary research on women's health.

The volume clearly represents a new and important contribution to a rapidly-growing field. It appears at a time when the field of sexual and reproductive health is asking new and difficult questions on factors underlying risk behaviours that require explanations that go beyond the confines of a single discipline. It provides
researchers the tools with which to obtain sound estimates of the health burden that reproductive tract infections and other gynaecological disorders impose on women in resource-poor settings, to interpret estimates from different sources of data, and to explore the factors underlying these reproductive ill health conditions and the ways in which the experience of them impinges on women’s lives.

The 28 authors bring together a range of strengths and experiences that have been synthesized into a cogent and instructive, elegantly and clearly written discourse on approaches to studying this topic. *Investigating Reproductive Tract Infections and Other Gynaecological Disorders* is essential reading for researchers interested in measuring and explaining women’s gynaecological morbidity. I am confident that the volume will contribute to a generation of new and sound information on the measurement of reproductive tract infections, and on explanations of reproductive choice, risk and protection, gender relations, obstacles to timely care and other critical areas related to women’s health and disease.

Paul F.A. Van Look
Acknowledgements

The need to review research approaches to the study of reproductive tract infections and other gynaecological disorders among women in developing countries is evident. Despite the considerable interest in conducting research on this topic, questions arose concerning the ideal study – topics that needed to be addressed, appropriate designs and community engagement, the kinds of clinical and laboratory examinations required, ways of interpreting findings from different sources of data and implications for programmes and policies. It was the need to address these questions that culminated in this multidisciplinary effort.

This work would have been impossible without the insights, co-operation and support of many.

Iqbal Shah, Senior Social Scientist and Paul Van Look, Director, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, World Health Organisation (Geneva) have been pivotal in this endeavour. They responded enthusiastically to the idea of assembling a consultative group, documenting research approaches, and basing this project at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva. We owe them a special debt of gratitude for this and for their valuable guidance and insights in shaping the volume both in terms of its content and its implementation.

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Finally, we are grateful to the authors themselves for agreeing to take on this ambitious project, and for responding so amiably to a host of requests, from incorporating suggestions from peer reviews on their own contributions to providing peer reviews of those of colleagues.

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