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JLM has received research grant support from Johnson & Johnson, Bayer Healthcare, and Schering-Plough, and honoraria from Bayer Healthcare. EB has received research grant support from Johnson & Johnson, Bayer Healthcare, and Daichi Sankyo, and honoraria from Johnson & Johnson. CMG has received research grant support from Johnson & Johnson and Bayer Healthcare, and honoraria from Johnson & Johnson.

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Towards a global fund for the health MDGs?

As we had expected, our Comment proposing a global fund for the health Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)1 sparked a lively debate. We would like to address some of the reactions published in The Lancet (June 20, p 2110–11),2,3 which echo those in other fora.

Alvaro Bermejo2 voices concern that a global fund for all the health MDGs (including the health systems needed to deliver health services and key areas within the social determinants of health) will divert attention and resources from “priority diseases”, thereby jeopardising recent gains. We concur that broadening the remit of the Global Fund and GAVI will require substantial additional resources, a point we made explicitly. We think, however, that the gains made in tackling some priority diseases are intrinsically fragile, since they often depend on fragile health systems, or on parallel health systems set up for selected diseases only. The limitations of disease-specific interventions operating within weak health systems have recently been examined:1 a comprehensive system-strengthening approach would sustain and expand the gains in control of some priority diseases. We should not fall into the trap of pitting diseases or conditions against each other or against health systems.

We concur with Helen Epstein1 that it is difficult for global health funding mechanisms with disease-specific focuses to fully support national health priorities, since they cannot respond to needs beyond their specific mandate. Broadening their mandate to health systems strengthening and all the health MDGs is a first step towards improved alignment.

Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Pronyk4 are correct in pointing out that the Harvard Consensus Statement did not assume that health systems were “functioning reasonably well”. That line in our Comment referred to the establishment of global health initiatives that bypassed national financial autonomy criteria only for disease-specific interventions. We apologise for the confusion we might have created. Sachs and Pronyk propose the establishment of additional funding windows by the Global Fund, in line with its present modus operandi. In the long run, however, countries should be allowed to submit proposals based on their comprehensive health plans, without having to disaggregate them into narrower components that fit within specific funding windows.

We appreciate Peter Navario’s suggestions (July 18, p 184)1 for building on PEPFAR’s success in improving access to HIV care and treatment during the first 5 years of the programme. PEPFAR is a learning organisation and much has changed during the evolution from an emergency approach to more sustainable treatment programmes.

We agree that ensuring patients remain on treatment once started is of crucial importance for all HIV treatment programmes, including those supported by PEPFAR. We also agree that routine monitoring of retention rates will help develop innovative interventions to successfully retain patients. Earlier this year, we revised our indicators for 2010 and future reporting, adding “Percent of adults and children known to be alive and on treatment 12 months after initiation of antiretroviral therapy”. Identification of an appropriate indicator for adherence has not been

Monitoring and evaluation of PEPFAR treatment programmes


GC is a member of GAVI Health System Strengthening Task Team; his views are not necessarily those of Save the Children UK or of the GAVI Alliance. GO, AS, and PZ have no conflicts of interest.

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