

South Asian Forum for Health Research (SAFHeR)

South Asian Forum for Health Research (SAFHeR) was created in the year 2003 with an aim of enhancing regional collaboration and partnership in health research among South Asian countries. This consultative meeting was organized by Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC), Nepal for the Development of Health Research Agenda for South Asia where most of the regional health research councils had participated for discussion and to address common health problems in the region.

Vision: The vision of South Asian Forum for Health Research is to achieve better health for the people of South Asia.

Mission: The mission of SAFHeR is to facilitate regional collaboration among the South Asian countries addressing common health problems towards sustainable solutions.

Objectives:

- To exchange health research related information (ongoing health research, research results, database)
- To coordinate health research agenda
- To promote research culture
- To strengthen the health research capacity building in the region
- To develop partnership among the countries in the region
- To collaborate on research in common health problem including cross-border issues
- To ensure utilization of health research information
- To co-ordinate exchange of resources and
- To arrange periodic meetings

During 2008 to 2010, three regional meetings of SAFHeR were organized in Nepal by Nepal Health Research Council. In July 2011, the NHRC, Nepal, formally transferred the SAFHeR secretariat to ICMR for the next three years.

Henceforth, the International Health Division of ICMR organized the Fourth Regional Meeting of SAFHeR during February 5 to 7, 2012 at India International Centre, New Delhi under the overarching theme “Empowering through sharing - working towards implementation of regional

health research priorities”. The meeting was inaugurated by Shri. Ghulam Nabi Azad, Hon’ble Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India and Smt. Preneet Kaur, Hon’ble Minister of State for External Affairs, Government of India. Secretaries of different Ministries/ Departments of Government of India, eminent scientists and experts in health research addressed the Forum delegates from the member countries - Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The agenda of SAFHeR has considerably widened over the years to encompass common regional priority areas in health research. In the 2012 meeting at New Delhi, member countries showcased their understanding of existing regional determinants of the health challenges with respect to their country and requirement of research capacity in identified priority areas. The presentations were made by Indian experts in identified priority areas with respect to regional obstacles as faced by member countries and cross country issues; areas for collaboration/training/capacity building.

The meeting concluded with the discussions and strategic planning for development of common researchable issues, protocols and capacity building in identified common research areas in the region. The meeting has imparted further momentum to the SAFHeR process. A Joint Declaration was issued at the end of the meeting where participants from member countries ensured their commitment towards continuing efforts for regional cooperation.

SAFHeR constitutes an important step towards building fruitful synergies of regional cooperation and developing the networks for better health for the people of the South Asian region. To further accelerate the forum activities, ICMR will support a workshop entitled “Foundation Workshop for Undergraduate Students in Clinical and Laboratory Medicine Research” at New Delhi in near future with participation of faculty and researchers from SAFHeR member countries.

Some of the Recommendations (Action Plan) of Fourth SAFHeR meeting held in India:

1. The Forum of eight participating regional nations - Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India agreed to work together in the area of health research on equal partnership and long term basis where each country would fund their respective research portion.
2. The partnership among eight nations would be guided by the principles of respect for national sovereignty, national ownership and independence, equality, non conditionality, non-interference in domestic affairs and mutual benefit. Accordingly, a New Delhi Declaration adopted and signed by Head of delegates from member countries ensured their commitment towards continuing efforts for regional cooperation.
3. The member countries need to identify the nodal technical officer(s)/ after due approval from respective Research Council of their countries to establish points of contact for the implementation.
4. Workshops for protocol development in mutually identified areas of interest should be organized.
5. The proposed theme for next SAFHeR meeting as agreed by member countries would be “Sharing of success stories and barriers”.

6. SAFHeR can consider publishing a periodical newsletter and consider having website for discussion/interactions and sharing of knowledge among scientists of member countries.
7. The Research Councils of member countries shall prepare the following:
 - a) A list of scientists/investigators from each country to develop and undertake joint projects in the identified areas of research and prioritize the areas
 - b) A list of laboratories to offer training/ exchange of expertise with other member countries
8. Regional conferences /workshops in the areas of mutual interest under SAFHeR could be conducted for sharing of best practices, research experiences and findings.