

## Profile

### Dean Jamison: putting economics at the heart of global health

Dean Jamison, health economist, Professor of Global Health at the University of Washington in Seattle, and co-chair of the *Lancet* Commission on Investing in Health, chuckles when I ask him about the need for a new Commission 20 years after the World Bank's seminal 1993 World Development Report (WDR), *Investing in Health*, which he led. "It has been a fun project to work on again, given the enormous change in the landscape of global health in the past 20 years", he remarks. "Health conditions have improved more than we thought possible 20 years ago. We have witnessed substantial increases in life expectancy, and a nearly halving of child mortality. The time is right to look back at the huge journey we have taken, and where we need to be heading in the next 20 years and beyond."

WDR 1993 received a vitriolic reception in some quarters, notably on the left and right of the political spectrum. "We struggled with the politics of WDR 1993 within the World Bank. The compromise was that we produced a centre left report from a centre right institution. I was proud of that and understood the criticism from the right. The shrill criticism from the left, because we had identified a role for the private sector in helping to deliver health-care programmes, was more difficult to take", Jamison says.

A key difference between WDR 1993 and the new *Lancet* Commission is the latter's emphasis on universal health coverage (UHC) and its stance towards private voluntary insurance—the market forces of WDR 1993 now rejected in the 2013 Commission. "We are much more explicit about UHC in the 2013 report", Jamison says. "The path to UHC cannot work with reliance on voluntary private insurance." Jamison is only too aware of the strange situation that he finds himself in, living in the USA where UHC remains an unrealised hope to some and an undesirable socialist idea to others. "We have what you would call a fairly primitive debate over here about UHC. The complex Obamacare version ahead of us is the only palatable option politically", he adds.

The World Bank was Jamison's intellectual home in the 1970s and 1980s, after he had completed postgraduate studies in economics at Harvard under Kenneth Arrow. "Arrow's well-considered application of mathematics, clarity of exposition, and focus on important issues were qualities I have aspired to throughout my career", Jamison says. His early work at the bank was as an education economist, but he was soon drawn to its operational work in health and population analysis. He describes the World Bank then as "an intellectual bureaucracy, where we spent hours in intense discussions, and in producing perfectly argued memos". It was when China joined the World Bank in 1978 that Jamison became focused on health economics, resulting from

an assignment to analyse China's progress in health and nutrition. He then spent time heading up the bank's health work in China before moving into academia as Professor of Education and Public Health at the University of California, Los Angeles whilst on extended leave from the bank.

In 1992, Larry Summers, then Chief Economist at the World Bank before he became US Treasury Secretary in the Clinton administration, invited Jamison to Washington DC to discuss plans for a new World Bank project, the World Development Report, which would aim to address health policy inequities and inefficiencies in international health. Jamison recalls how "Larry showed me a 20-page summary of what WDR 1993 wanted to say, and asked me to give him my three conclusions the following day. He must have liked what I said as he asked me to head up the WDR 1993 report."

Today, Jamison says his work at the University of Washington is characterised by "Equations, words, a pen, and a yellow pad of paper". His current priority is his ongoing research into the economic assessment of disease control priorities—a comprehensive economic assessment of global health programmes—a third edition of which will be published in 2014–15.

Summers is clear about Jamison's contribution to global health. "Doctors know the names of the patients whose lives they save. Dean Jamison—whose contributions to better global health policy have saved more lives than any practising physician—does not have that satisfaction. Dean is an intellectual leader and policy entrepreneur *par excellence*. His insistence on rigorous benefit cost analysis has been a huge contribution and not what one thinks of as medical research. But like those who insisted on double-blind controls, and on doctors washing their hands, he has made a huge contribution to human welfare."

Born 70 years ago, Jamison describes a happy if somewhat nomadic childhood, a result of his father being a US Air Force pilot which meant a new home in a different part of the world every 2 or 3 years. He particularly enjoyed mathematics, and studied engineering at Stanford University before turning to economics at Harvard. His current priority is learning how to work part-time. "It's easy to get half pay, but more difficult to work half the hours. I am spending quite a bit of time at the moment negotiating with my wife on how to work less. It's not easy", he sighs. Mathematics and physics occupy what Jamison calls "his intellectual free time", and he also enjoys tennis. "I wondered why I kept missing the ball and getting hit while standing at the net, and thought it was a slowing of my reflexes", he remarks. "But that's all changed since I had my cataracts removed. It's great to see the ball clearly again."

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