

Evidence and innovation in humanitarian assistance: 'Conference without Borders' to address Syrian conflict #MSFSci

The MSF Scientific Days are a round of conferences looking at how humanitarian action can be improved by scientific research and innovation. On behalf of the organisers, [Sarah Venis](#) presents an overview. This year will feature a strong focus on the effects of the Syrian conflict and the resultant refugee and migration crisis. Another theme will also look at how to use technology to help and not hinder medical care. Join the discussion online and share your thoughts on the conference using the Twitter hashtag #MSFSci.



How strong is the evidence base underlying humanitarian medical assistance? How do you innovate safely to overcome the obstacles inherent in delivering care in conflict settings or to regions where no direct access to the population is possible, such as the besieged areas of Syria? Every year, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) attempts to answer some of these questions in a round of conferences, [the MSF Scientific Days](#), held in London ([20th May – medical research](#), [21st May – innovation](#)), South Asia ([28th May](#)), and Southern Africa ([June 9th](#)). These conferences, livestreamed (except Southern Africa) and [free to attend and access](#), were watched last year by over 5,200 people in 115 countries. The events are intended to catalyse debate on the state of humanitarian medical aid, to challenge MSF and other organisations to improve the quality of their work, and to ensure that discussion of humanitarian research and innovation in new models of care and technology is accessible for anyone with an internet-enabled device.

Determining the impact of research and innovation is a growing area in MSF. From surveying 30 presenters from the 2015 MSF Scientific Days in London, we know that their research and projects:

- had an impact on MSF programs (63%)
- were widely disseminated (80% research, 71% innovation)
- were more likely to have an impact on MSF and external policies if they were research studies (47%) rather than innovation projects (17%)
- were more likely to receive media coverage if they were innovation projects (60%) rather than research (13%)

And most importantly, we learnt that most innovation projects reached their aims or had fed into new projects.

This year, the MSF Scientific Days will feature a strong focus on the effects of the Syrian conflict, both directly and in the resultant refugee and migration crisis. The past year has seen the increasing frequency of deliberate targeting of hospitals by warring parties, a strategy that has become appallingly common in Syria. In his keynote speech in London on 20th May, Zaher Sahloul, the past-President and current Head of the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) Global Response, will give his personal reflection on the Syrian crisis and address the challenges of providing health-care in such extreme circumstances. The ensuing session on migration and mental health will follow migrants from camps in Iraq and on their journey across Europe, ending at the notorious 'jungle' camp in Calais, France. On 21st May, Kilian Kleinschmidt, Chairman of Swissboard and former head of Zaatari camp, Jordan, will look, from a different angle, at the need for innovation in traditional humanitarian responses to refugee and migrant populations, followed by a session on MSF attempts to innovate on data acquisition and management in the context of besieged populations in Syria.



Image credit: Syrian Children filling drinking water in bottles at Al-Zaatari camp by [Mustafa Bader](#) CC BY-SA

One of the themes of the Innovation Day is how to use technology to help and not hinder medical care. This is the focus of our second Keynote speaker on the 21st May, Zubin Damania, aka ZDoggMD, CEO of Turntable Health, a doctor who creates viral music videos to highlight issues in health-care and the perils of ill-thought out technology. The session following his talk examines MSF efforts to introduce technology that is beneficial for our populations, ranging from electronic algorithms to help tackle antibiotic overprescribing to using state of the art technology in assessing damage to the eye caused by malaria.

The MSF Scientific Days have been held since 2004, and in that time much has changed. For instance, there are now well established ethics frameworks for research in humanitarian settings, a welcome development. However, ethics was one of the many issues that became prominent in the West Africa Ebola outbreak last year, and on the 20th May we will host a debate centring on whether the current system for ethics overview is fit for purpose for research in such emergencies. In addition, how we think about ethics in early innovation projects that don't fit within standard medical research frameworks has been a notable gap. In response to a question raised at the Scientific Days last year, MSF has developed a (draft) [Ethics Framework for Medical Humanitarian Innovation](#). The framework has been used to help guide innovation day presenters and will feature in the responses of a panel voting on pitches of innovative projects on the 21st May.

We hope you will be able to join us either in person or online. Our online audience is a hugely important part of the day; please join them and share your thoughts on the conference using the Twitter hashtag #MSFSci. By doing so, you can help make this truly a conference without borders, a place to debate and further innovation and evidence in humanitarian medicine.

For the MSF Scientific Day agendas and to watch the conference free live online visit: <http://www.msf.org.uk/msf-scientific-days>. This piece has been cross-posted on [The Lancet Global Health blog](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Sarah Venis is a research coordinator and medical editor at Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), based in London, UK. She is especially interested in how you ensure that research has impact and is the content lead for the MSF Scientific Days in London. Before MSF, she worked at *The Lancet*.

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