



## Stakeholder forum 1—General practice research networks: can we afford not to have them?

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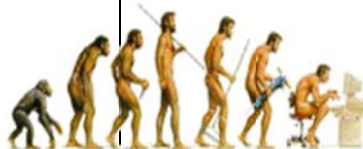
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"Research that makes a difference"

## Practice-based research networks: what are they and what do they do?

Prof. Nicholas Zwar  
University of New South Wales



Research in general practice and primary health care is important but there is not enough done

- Primary care research seeks to answer questions of immediate relevance to the health of the community.
- It has been described as “the missing link in the development of high-quality, evidence-based health care for populations”

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## Challenges faced in primary care research

- It is difficult in Australia to conduct larger scale clinical, epidemiological and health services research in primary care.
- General practice research has been criticised for the lack of intervention studies and the preponderance of small scale, descriptive and survey-based studies with poor response rates.
- Conducting larger scale projects such as clinical research studies requires an organisational structure of interested practitioners who can provide the setting for reliable identification and recruitment of patients.

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## Networks of research practices provide the missing link

- Practice-based research networks provide a setting and organisational structure to facilitate research in general practice and to address questions relevant to general practitioners

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## Seeing the future

- “during the next three years, we should develop networks of research practices with practitioners skilled in research, who, in time, would link up to form a National Research Network to undertake large scale studies”

*Medical Journal of Australia 2002*

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## Examples of practice-based research networks

- **Medical Research Council General Practice Research Framework**

Long established national network of practices with trained research nurses. Examples of recent studies conducted through MRC GPRF include: WISDOM11, a multi-centre (UK, Australia and New Zealand) randomised controlled trial exploring the long-term balance between the benefits and hazards of HRT in post-menopausal women aged 50-69 treated for ten years pain.

## Examples of practice-based research networks in Britain

- **Scottish Primary Care Research Network**

This is a national network coordinated by the Scottish School of Primary Care. SPCRN maintains a database of primary care professionals and practices who are interested in research. Researchers who wish to conduct a project in primary care approach SPCRN who, if they agree that the project is of high quality and relevance to primary care, engage practitioners and practices through a local coordinator in one of four regional nodes.

## Examples of practice-based research networks in Britain

- **Midlands Research Practice Consortium (MidReC)**, This network is linked with a Research Support Facility to form a Primary Care Clinical Research and Trials Unit. This network is involved in a series of studies with a focus on cardiovascular disease. A recent example has been a randomised trial of warfarin versus aspirin in stroke prevention in patients aged over 75.

A feature of this network is the use of secure electronic linkage of research practices to a central server. This can be used for communication about eligibility, recruitment and randomisation of patients as well as a portal for offering training and support to practices in the network.

## Need for investment in skills development

- In developing structures to enable researchers to conduct trials and other high quality studies, the practitioners involved will need training to host such research studies, and will need to be valued if they are to retain their involvement in academically initiated research.
- Continued investment in skills development is essential including better integration of research training with general practice vocational training.

## What PBRNs do...

- Help identify important and relevant clinical or health services research questions
- Engage GPs in research
- Facilitate recruitment of practices into studies
- Facilitate recruitment of patients into studies
- Address aspects of translation into practice
- Value add to the clinical role of the practice
- Encourage students and trainees into research

## What is in it for practices?

- Intellectual interest and contribution to the discipline
- Manageable contribution to research
- Increased understanding of research through participation and feedback
- Closer connection with University programs of research and teaching
- Improved patient care

## Essential elements of PBRNs

- Processes to link primary care practitioners with researchers including opportunities to have input into research project development and involvement in piloting of projects
- A system for selecting the studies to be undertaken so that the network is not stretched beyond capacity in any one topic or regional area.
- Systems for timely and relevant feedback on project involvement such as progress on recruitment

## Essential elements (Contd)

- Access to research skills training for practice staff including training on how to make best use of practice data systems
- Information technology capacity and improved data collection in practices
- A system for remunerating practices and practitioners for their involvement
- High quality, research trained co-ordination staff to provide the outreach and crucial face-to-face contact with practitioners.

## Where are practice-based research networks up to in their evolution in Australia?



- PHReNet-GP is a practice based research network established by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Research Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity to support and coordinate the participation of General Practices and Divisions of General Practice in high quality, priority driven primary health care research that makes a difference to clinical practice and health policy.
- PHReNet-GP provides an organisational structure through which linkages between primary health care practitioners and academic researchers at the UNSW Research Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity can be developed and supported.
- Through PHReNet-GP, participation in research will be more effectively coordinated and streamlined so that primary health care practitioners are invited to take part in projects that are likely to be of clinical interest and avoid overloading them with requests.
- PHReNet-GP will provide its members with an avenue to generate ideas for future research on topics that are important and of interest to general practice in NSW.
- PHReNet-GP will enable the UNSW Research Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity to more effectively communicate results of research projects and discuss the practice implications of the research findings to general practices participating in projects.





## What next?

- Further development of network structure, tools and processes
- Qualitative project to find out about best options for facilitating involvement
- Projects in the pipeline
  - Teamlink study
  - Stroke prevention study
  - sleep apnoea diagnosis study
  - COPD early diagnosis and intervention study
  - Shared assessment in CVD study

## Hunter NE Central Coast NRGP



Parker Magin



## Basic Principles

- General Practice only
- Regional
  - Hunter
  - New England
  - Central Coast
- “Ground-up” rather than “top-down”

## Basic Principles

- Embed a practice culture accepting of and supportive of research
- Preferred model
  - Start small
  - Rate of expansion limited by
    - capacity to support
    - ability to maintain cohesion

## First Project

- Occupational violence in general practice
  - receptionists and other staff
- Qualitative study
- Cross-sectional questionnaire-based study

## First annual research meeting

- Tuscany Estate Hunter Valley
- Keynote speaker: Clare Heal
- Individual research from practice ideas
- Workshopping



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THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

## PracNet

Dr Kathryn Dwan  
Academic Unit of General Practice & Community Health  
2007

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## PracNet membership

- 6 urban practices (ACT)
- 4 rural practices (South East NSW)
  - Includes both group, partner & solo practices
  - All are teaching practices
  - All accredited
  - All computerised (to some degree)
- \$5,000 start-up funding

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## Reasons for participating in the network

- Intellectual stimulation
- Statistical support
- Ongoing learning / enjoyment
- Share information / communication
- Update own practice

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## Antibiotics and acnes in general practice

- **What is the prevalence of antibiotic resistant organisms in patients with acne attending general practice?**
  - 10 general practices are participating
  - Aim to recruit 160 subjects with acne (14-45 yrs)
  - Collect skin & nose swabs
  - Complete questionnaire - antibiotic use, health care worker, usual demographics