GPs at frontline of research

What difference could GP’s who know how to undertake a research project make to the health care you receive?

It could be a big difference – and it can happen here in the Illawarra. With the recent establishment of the Illawarra and Southern Practice Research Network (ISPRN) we have a great opportunity to bring a research focus into our doctors’ surgeries based on problems or questions they encounter while consulting.

This Network is affiliated with 24 GP practices in our region, located in Wollongong’s northern suburbs, to the far south coast. It extends west to Mudgee. Its aim is to draw on the experience and insight of practicing clinicians to identify and frame research questions and work with others to find the answers.

GPs are perfectly positioned to be at the frontline of research to improve treatment of patients. They live and breathe the diversity of people, ailments, concerns, and social and industry service changes in their everyday work.

Therefore they are attuned to where changes could be made to enhance the care provided.

I found this out after almost 20 years of practice at my clinic on the South Coast. The clinic employs GP Registrars – university medical graduates with some clinical experience undertaking on-the-job training to gain their fellowship of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.

It became clear that older patients of our practice were reluctant to see a GP registrar if their regular doctor was unavailable. Investigating this trend became a three-year project for me, through the Centre for Health Initiatives at the University of Wollongong (UOW).

What I have found is far more complex and challenging than I ever thought and will soon lead to even more study, through a PhD.

In many cases, GPs do not have the support needed to develop an evidence base for implementing the change.

This is where ISPRN comes in. It draws on the academic research environment at the Graduate School of Medicine at UOW, as well as on staff from other departments who have primary health care research interests, to support GPs in research.

Established by a grant from the Commonwealth Government’s Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development Strategy, ISPRN will address the gap in research...
skills by enhancing the ability of the GP practices involved to conduct research based on questions driven from their daily work.

ISPRN will focus its attention on mentoring and supporting early and mid career GPs to undertake high quality primary health care research. We hope to create a true research community of GPs and academics to identify and develop the priority questions for research through forums, online research discussion, conferences and networking.

Research projects our members are currently developing include improving management of chronic diseases like diabetes and obesity. Research on policy topics, such as the use of chaperones in general practice, is also in development.

Ultimately, the true value of the Network will be in its outcomes for this region. We are optimistic that it will inspire locally relevant research directly applicable to the Illawarra and regional NSW, create a stimulating academic environment and will create a direct link between local problems and local solutions.

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