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## 78 – The Role of The Royal College of General Practitioners (UK) in Developing Research Capacity and Capability in Primary Care

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The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) in the UK is the largest professional organisation of General Practitioners (GPs) in the world with over 50,000 members. The RCGP has an important role in facilitating research by its members, building primary care research capacity and capability and collaborating with the academic community, particularly on its key strategic and clinical priorities. The RCGP recognises that there are potential benefits of undertaking research in General Practice, not only for patients themselves but also for the individual members of primary health care teams, the academic community and the wider NHS.

The benefits to GPs themselves in participating in research projects include the acquisition of new knowledge and skills which can lead to more satisfaction in their professional lives and create opportunities for career progression. The majority of GPs, of course, wish to be primarily the users of the results of research. However, a substantial minority of GPs do wish to collaborate in the conduct of research, although it is only a small minority who wish or have the opportunity to initiate research in General Practice. The growing emphasis on translational research and getting evidence into clinical practice have also contributed to many development and opportunities for GP research.

Professional bodies such as the RCGP have become increasingly involved in recent years in supporting the training of GPs to do research. The importance of research is clearly stated in the RCGP curriculum which sets out what is required to practise as an independent General Practitioner in the UK NHS (<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/gp-training-and-exams/gp-curriculum-overview.aspx>). In addition, the RCGP, through its charitable funding body, the Scientific Foundation Board (SFB) (<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/research-opportunities-and-awards/scientific-foundation-board-sfb.aspx>) provides annual “pump-priming” funding opportunities of up to £20,000 for individual GPs to get started on research projects with support from the local university departments. The SFB has been established since 1976 and has been responsible for nurturing the early research careers of general practitioners and primary care scientists who have gone on to develop key roles in academia (including one of the authors of this article, NM).

The College, of course, does not work in a vacuum and there are many other schemes which support GP research. These include the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) in the UK which provides In-Practice Academic Fellowships in the form of entry level funding for GPs who wish to experience a “taster” of the GP academic life before deciding whether or not to embark on an academic career.

The RCGP is also keen to offer support to practices. The attraction of general practice based research includes both the geographical and demographic diversity of GP practices. The RCGP offers a scheme that provides the quality assurance of practices

taking part in research. For example, the College provides a set of quality standards for the accreditation of “Research Ready” (RR) practices (<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/research-opportunities-and-awards/research-ready-self-accreditation.aspx>). The scheme was initially commissioned by the Department of Health and developed in conjunction with the NIHR Clinical Research Network (NIHR CRN). The RR programme comprises five core competencies that cover the essential knowledge needed to safely and effectively undertake research in primary care. More than 1,000 practices in the UK have already been successful in achieving RCGP accreditation to undertake research by measurement against core competencies of the scheme which includes providing evidence of good clinical practice in research.

General Practice, of course, is “where the patients are” and GP electronic patient records offer an unparalleled opportunity for high-quality epidemiological and clinical research. This is exemplified by RCGP Research and Surveillance Centre (<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/research-and-surveillance-centre.aspx>). The incidence data provided through consultation data from over 100 practices in England and Wales provides the early warning of changes in the incidence of common illnesses such as influenza like-illness and incidence rates for acute illnesses, as detailed in the RCGP’s weekly Communicable and Respiratory Disease Report for England and Wales.

The RCGP also provides recognition to an individual or group of researchers who have undertaken and published an exceptional piece of research relating to general practice or primary care, through its Research Paper of the Year award, now in its 18th year. There is a formal presentation of the winning paper at the annual RCGP Conference and an award of £1,000 to the authors. The most recent award was presented at the 2014 RCGP annual conference to Dr Joe Gallagher on behalf of the authors of the winning paper (\*).

Exceptional individuals involved in research are recognised by the RCGP through other awards. The RCGP Discovery prize for the most sustained contribution to GP research have included such luminaries as Julian Tudor-Hart of “Inverse Care Law” fame. More recently the Yvonne Carter award, in memory of Professor Yvonne Carter, is presented jointly by the RCGP and the Society for Academic Primary Care (SAPC) and aims to support the career developments of a promising new researcher in primary care, particularly by facilitating international research links. The most recent recipient is a primary care scientist, Dr Helen Atherton. In terms of potential new awards, an appeal has recently been launched by the RCGP to support primary care mental health researchers through the Helen Lester Appeal for Mental Health Research. Helen Lester was a GP champion of patients with mental health problems.

Finally the academic hub of the RCGP, the Clinical Innovation and Research Centre (CIRC, currently chaired by Dr Imran Rafi) provides a link with external organisations to develop joint collaborative working. An example of this is the submission of research topics by key RCGP clinical champions to the NIHR designed to lead onto ‘fully developed’ research funding opportunities. A further example is a recent RCGP-NIHR Multimorbidity workshop which brought together key academics in Multimorbidity research with representatives from key organisations such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to reflect the importance of translatable research.

## Take home messages

- General Practitioners organisations have important roles in facilitating research by their members, building primary care research capacity and capability, and working closely with the academic community.
- There are considerable benefits to GPs themselves in engaging in research.

## Original abstract

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/3505-role-royal-college-general-practitioners-developing-research-capacity-and-capability>

## References:

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