

The Federation of Primary Care Research Networks: a national initiative to enhance networking locally

Helen Smith Senior Lecturer in Primary Medical Care, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

There has been widespread recognition of the need to focus the relevance and quality of research in UK primary health care. Local research networks have been proposed as one method to stimulate the rigour, quantity and usefulness of health services research, and there are now over 40 local Primary Care Research Networks (PCRNs) throughout the country. These networks provide responsive, accessible research support which enables local primary care practitioners to develop research arising from their clinical practice and to incorporate research evidence in their daily work. PCRNs facilitate collaborative involvement in research and development (R&D) across organizational and professional boundaries in order to increase the ultimate impact on patient care.

PCRNs were initiated and developed in isolation from each other, but their co-ordinators soon recognized the need to come together and share experiences and resources. This informal 'networking of the networks' was given further impetus by the Mant Report (Mant, 1997) which recognized the importance of a national group co-ordinating collaborative R&D activity across regional boundaries. In 1998, the UK Federation of Primary Care Research Networks was formally established to bring together networks in order to facilitate their collective functioning and promote their interests at a national level. The Federation respects the many different local approaches to net-

working and research support, but at the same time wishes to encourage collaboration between networks so as to maximize their impact on the evidence base for primary health care. In contrast to the networks themselves, which support people working within primary care, the Federation is for people working with PCRNs as directors, co-ordinators, trainers or administrators.

One of the key objectives of the Federation is to improve discussion and collaboration between the ever-growing number of PCRNs, and to provide opportunities to share strategies for successful networking, training, research and development. The Federation newsletter, *NetConnect*, contains 'soundbites' on what is happening around the country. We deliberately decided not to publish definitive articles so that those wishing to hear the full story would have to enter into a dialogue with the soundbite author. Further initiatives to facilitate exchange of ideas include the Federation's annual conference, the electronic discussion list NET-LIST, and a Web page which is currently being developed.

As a national organization the Federation is raising the profile of PCRNs. It provides information about the needs and views of networks to external organizations, funding bodies and government, as well as co-ordinating PCRNs' responses to national activities such as R&D agenda setting. By working together, we are beginning to tackle those generic issues which challenge all networks, including the development of meaningful outcome measures and skills training for network co-ordinators.

The number of PCRNs has grown significantly

Address for correspondence: Dr Helen Smith, Wessex Primary Care Research Network, Primary Medical Care, Aldermoor Health Centre, Aldermoor Close, Southampton SO16 5ST, UK.

over the last few years. Although diverse in their structure, they all provide training and research support and facilitate collaborative research. The challenge for the Federation is to ensure that local PCRNPs succeed both in promoting enthusiasm and interest in research and also in delivering high-quality research.

References

- Mant, D.** 1997: *Research and development in primary care*. National Working Group Report. Bristol: NHS Executive South and West.