

# The development of research capacity in Europe through research workshops—the EGPRN perspective

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## Research in primary care

The academic development of the domain of General Practice and family medicine (FM) has made notable progress recently, but one should never rest on one's laurels.<sup>1–4</sup> Continuing progress requires a strong research base for the discipline, which is still weak both in terms of evidence, with relatively few publications from primary care, and in the limited number of research institutes around the world. Ironically, even though the evidence for primary care in health care systems is rather strong<sup>5</sup> and international political support has been repeatedly promised,<sup>6</sup> the spirit of Alma Ata seems not to have been realized and governments seem to be more supportive of investment in secondary and tertiary care.<sup>5</sup>

The key to development as an independent specialist discipline is the development of an independent research base to define the characteristics of the domain, to support clinical work and to inform educational and professional development. Primary care researchers have to go beyond the agenda of public health and secondary care and carry out research into the content and delivery of primary care and into diagnosis in primary care.<sup>7,8</sup>

What does research in general practice/FM entail? The researcher may be a clinician with a special interest, a student who is preparing a dissertation for a University degree or a researcher from a field outside medicine. A research question is developed, and with some advice, an appropriate methodology is selected

(such as a questionnaire to fellow clinicians, a study of patient records or an intervention to improve practice). The novice researcher will benefit enormously from expert advice at this stage since errors in research question development or methodology for data collection may make the project untenable at a later stage. Successful completion of the project may result in obtaining a degree, improving practice at a local or regional setting in a specific domain or national or international publication of a paper and the start of a new academic career in parallel or instead of a purely clinical one. Successful publication will make access to research grants and/or career posts, and further publication, more likely.

## Networking and building research capacity

Other articles in this series focus on pathways for developing careers in research. Some of the authors have published recently on how academic careers may develop in the European environment.<sup>9</sup> This article focuses on how primary care research capacity building has been supported in Europe through the agency of general practice and FM networks and specifically through international research courses.

The European General Practice Research Network (EGPRN; formerly Workshop, EGPRW)<sup>10</sup> is the network that deals with the research stream within Wonca (World Organisation of Family Doctors) Europe. EGPRN started in the 1970s as an enthusiastic group of general practitioners (GPs) from several European

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countries meeting twice a year to discuss research ideas and methodology in a safe and collaborative environment.<sup>11</sup> It has grown into an international network working to develop research capacity and research strategy in general practice in Europe.<sup>8,12</sup> Other such networks with similar histories include the North American Primary Care Research Group<sup>13</sup> and the International Federation of Primary Care Research Networks<sup>14</sup> and various organizations such as SAPC in the UK and SGAM in Germany, and practice-based research networks (PBRNs) that have developed in the USA and Europe.<sup>15–19</sup> PBRNs have shifted the focus of research from technology in the hospital to patients and their diseases in the community.<sup>20</sup> A recent FM research conference in Kingston, Canada, led to important recommendations for improving primary care research, not least of which is the so-called Brisbane Initiative<sup>21</sup> for research courses. The EGPRN research course in Malta was one of the first to align itself with this process.

Joining such a network as EGPRN affords the novice researcher significant advantages. Researchers have opportunities to attend regular annual or biannual conferences, where high-quality research is presented and critically appraised and discussed and where evolving research ideas are developed in a workshop environment, where anyone can contribute. New research ideas and methodologies are discussed and demonstrated, and young researchers may join research projects led by experienced researchers and learn through direct experience. Networking offers opportunities for learning through joining projects in progress, for career development, for mentoring and for discovery of funding and course opportunities in other universities or countries. The EGPRN network has also supported collaborative research projects directly with funding and by allowing such projects to be presented, discussed and developed during its meetings. Examples of high-profile studies that have been developed within the workshop and became collaborative EGPRN studies include the Burnout Study<sup>22</sup> and the qualitative study on adherence in diabetes care in Europe.<sup>23</sup>

## Research methods courses

One of the more successful methods to develop research capacity at the basic and intermediate level

within EGPRN has been the series of 5-day research methodology courses held in various countries. The courses were organized in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, national colleges for FM and academic bodies. Eleven courses have been run by EGPRN since 1984 [in the UK, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden (twice), Malta (twice) and Turkey]. The courses support participants as they develop a research question into a research protocol through practical developmental activities with the assistance of expert general practice researchers. The course was designed to achieve a balance between theoretical and practical learning and between conceptual and factual topics and has been delivered by various EGPRN members over the years using different formulae for content and duration. The model has been successful; Wonca now plans to implement a similar course spanning a number of weekends, similar to this European model, which will run in various regions around the world.

The basic aim of the EGPRN course is to provide Primary Health Care professionals with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for undertaking research. Key skills include refining a research idea into a research question, selecting an appropriate methodology, running and coordinating a study, literature searching, networking skills and opportunities, effective collaboration and attitudinal aspects such as focus and scientific discipline, maintaining equipoise and an ethical approach.

The learning objectives achieved by the course are listed in point form in Box 1.

The courses have been targeted at European Primary Health Care workers of all professions, but the majority of participants to date have been GPs and family doctors. The number of participants has been limited to  $\leq 30$  to support the development of a group ethos. Courses last for 5 days, but one shorter model, consisting of an intensive weekend, has been piloted in Italy (see below).

Each session in the course begins with a half-hour didactic lecture after which the participants break into small groups of 5–10 members. The theme of the lecture is developed and applied by incorporation of the content into the design of a research protocol by the group for 40–45 minutes. Over the 5 days of the course, the research question matures into a full research protocol. There is also time for participants to

### Box 1 *Course learning objectives*

1. To help participants to formulate ideas that can be tested in a scientific manner.
2. To give participants a basic understanding of epidemiological methods, biostatistics and qualitative research methods.
3. To develop the critical faculties of participants for evaluation of their own and other people's work.
4. To give practical experience of development of study protocols and applications for research funding.
5. To give practical experience of use of computers for word processing, database manipulation, use of spreadsheets, statistical analysis, preparation of slides and overheads and Internet communication.

practise research skills such as literature searching, use of statistical and qualitative analysis programmes and use of presentation graphics programmes.

The final day of the course is a seminar where each project is formally presented, with slides, and discussed by all the participants and staff, using a critical appraisal approach.

The small groups then identify principal investigators from among themselves to carry out the project using the mentorship of the course teachers.

## Teaching experiences

Three examples of variants of this course that the authors have run are outlined to provide further illustration.

### *Antalya 2005 (5-day course)*

This EGPRN International Course on Research in Primary Health Care was organized at the Akdeniz University in Antalya in June 2005. Twenty-nine participants took part in this English language course, with some simultaneous translation into Turkish provided. During these 5 days, participants developed research proposals and projects appropriate to a primary care setting. Practical activities included retrieving references from scientific literature databases and transferring these into a citation manager programme and statistical analysis exercises performed using SPSS. The addition of qualitative research lectures completed a well-balanced research methods curriculum.

As a result of this course further, short 1-day research methods courses have run in the surrounding provinces of Antalya (Denizli and Isparta). This was the first primary care research methods course in Turkey. Participants were stimulated by this course to publish in international peer-reviewed journals.

### *Telese Terme, 2005 (a weekend course)*

A shorter version of the EGPRN course was organized in July 2005 in Telese Terme, Southern Italy, by EGPRN and European Academy of Teachers in collaboration with the local branch of The National Society for Medical Education in General Practice (SNAMID).<sup>24</sup> It was structured to include 16 hours of teaching and discussion time over a weekend. The daily pattern moved from didactic teaching in the first part of the day to small group work and then practical work in the afternoon. The course was recognized under the Italian Continuing Medical Education system.

The 23 participants were all Italian GPs, involved or interested in research. They were divided into two groups for the course, each preparing and developing its own research project protocol as an exercise. A substantial proportion of the participants have

developed further research projects and have published their results in local or national journals.

### *Malta 2004 (5-day course, followed by an MSc in primary care)*

This course was held on Malta immediately before an EGPRN workshop in October 2004. A group of motivated Maltese, Italian and German doctors attended this first Brisbane Initiative course for teaching of primary care research methods.<sup>21</sup> The course format was the traditional EGPRN 5-day workshop, with participants attending formal lectures, and then breaking out into small groups to develop a research idea into a formal protocol presented to the full group for critical discussion. The course included structured hands-on skills development workshops on use of the Internet, literature searching and critical review, Microsoft Office applications, statistical analysis packages and others. The international tutors included EGPRN Executive Board members, supported by local lecturers with experience in research methods.

This course offered participants the option of continuing in a 12-week distance learning module on research methods provided through collaboration with the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland. This was an accredited module in a 3-year MSc programme in Primary Care and General Practice. Twelve participants from Malta and two from Italy continued on to complete the MSc (or Diploma) with the University of Ulster by July 2007. Topics of their research dissertations included sore throat, burnout, diabetes, statins, adherence to treatment, hormone replacement therapy, contraception, health care teams and training in FM. Their research dissertations will help to support the development of primary care in these countries. Some of the graduates look forward to developing careers in primary care research, locally and internationally. New entrants from Malta have joined the MSc programme each year since then.

Unfortunately, graduates of this programme have not always been able to utilize their qualification in career progression due to narrow criteria for higher degrees by local academic bodies.

## Conclusions

In summary, the EGPRN international primary care research course model has succeeded in building local research capacity at the local level at various sites in Europe. Participants have quite often moved on to run their own research projects and present them at Wonca or EGPRN meetings, successfully attend post-graduate courses, such as the online Masters in Ulster, and publish their research projects in local and international journals. The course can be delivered by a small international core group of experienced

researchers, with the participation of local faculty, using prepared materials and a defined structure. The courses have proved to be popular and have achieved appropriate and measurable outcomes. The recent link with an online MSc programme has provided an additional level of career enhancement and achievement and has allowed the quick and efficient development of a core group of qualified researchers who are used to working and studying together. The model should be developed and expanded and made available on demand in European venues and possibly further afield. Human resources and sustainable funding remain challenges, but the modest requirements to organize such a course make these hurdles easier to surmount. EGPRN has already expressed the intention to further coordinate and deliver content and researchers/teachers for basic research courses, who can work with local directors and institutes (universities or research course groups), to support the organization of these research courses.

## Declaration

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