

# General practice research in New Zealand and the world:

## a report from the WONCA Invitational Conference on Research in Family Medicine

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### Background

WONCA is the World Organisation of Family Doctors. Organisations representing general practitioners in 85 countries belong to WONCA and it has two other member types; 'direct' members, who are individuals, and 'department' members, representing academic departments of general practice. In March 2003 the WONCA Research Committee convened a meeting entitled '*Improving health and wellness: strengthening family/general practice research for the world*' in Kingston, Canada, with representatives from 36 nations (see Box 1).

New Zealand sent two delegates: Susan Dovey (a WONCA direct member), was a researcher in the Dunedin

RNZCGP Research Unit for many years, and is a past member of the College research committee and current employee of and researcher for the American Academy of Family Physicians, and Ngaire Kerse, a RNZCGP council member, member of the research committee and a senior lecturer in the Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, University of Auckland. Both delegates are currently resident in the United States. Ngaire is a Harkness Fellow with the Commonwealth Fund and on sabbatical in Seattle. Susan lives in Washington, DC. So while we were obviously the closest (cheapest) representatives to send from New Zealand, we were also able to represent New Zealand general practice's research interests.

In this report we will describe the conference and we hope to convey to New Zealand general practitioners a sense of the important contribution they make to the world of

general practice research. To date, research has been a relatively hidden element of general practice despite the activities of general practice researchers who are engaged internationally in essential, important and exciting enquiry that has real impact on our discipline. We report on the processes used in this meeting to signal the consolidation of general practice research worldwide.

### The meeting's purpose and processes

The conference aimed to assess the status of research in general practice internationally and to develop strategies to promote its advancement. Building on eight working papers (read beforehand by conference attendees) the conference format consisted of a series of small group discussions with feedback to plenary sessions. Conference leaders were Professor Walter Rosser from Queens University, Canada, and Professor

*Box 1. Countries represented at the WONCA Invitational research meeting*

Australia	Greece	Poland
Austria	Italy	Portugal
Belgium	Hong Kong	Scotland
Bosnia	Ireland	Singapore
Canada	Israel	Slovenia
China	Lithuania	South Africa
Colombia	Nepal	Spain
Croatia	Netherlands	Switzerland
Czech Republic	New Zealand	Trinidad and Tobago
Denmark	Nigeria	Ukraine
Estonia	Pakistan	United Kingdom
France	Philippines	United States of America

Chris van Weel, from the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands. The president of WONCA, Michael Boland, Ireland, underlined the need for each country to have a national research strategy with implementation plans locally. He also cautioned us to think outside the box and not to rely on experience alone – as that could sometimes mean that we would *'learn to make the same mistakes with greater confidence'*.

A group of 'outsiders' who were not general practice researchers were invited to offer commentary from time to time throughout the meeting. A memorable commentary was made by the editor of the *Lancet*, Richard Horton, who challenged participants to *'stop whingeing and get on with it'* along with an invitation to lobby him about relevant issues. A resulting editorial in the *Lancet* challenges primary care researchers.<sup>1</sup>

### The meeting's topics and related conclusions

#### Why do general practice research?

Informed by the conference papers and discussions in small groups, the meeting concluded that research in general practice:

- improves our practice;
- is essential for improving the health of nations;
- informs policy makers;
- is needed to inform international bodies (such as the World Health Organisation and Assembly, the World Bank); and
- is needed to inform governments in developed and underdeveloped nations and local bodies about family medicine.

General practice research gives insight and understanding about the morbidity and health-risk pattern in

communities. General practice has developed specific tools and methods to cope with the uncertainty of early signs and symptoms, co-morbidity, and patients' needs, demands and expectations that can only be met in the primary health care setting. General practice research is essential to shore up clinical primary health care/general practice in its role as the foundation of effective and efficient health care systems. Developing nations and developed nations with

less than adequate primary health care can learn from primary health care research. Local communities will have different health care priorities and the ability to establish sentinel systems to monitor health and illness in the community was emphasised. To be relevant and to have the greatest impact on patients' health status, general practice research must be directed to understanding the complexity of family medicine.

#### Capacity building in general practice research

While the potential value of general practice research was readily defined, it was obvious to conference participants that a dearth of trained

general practice researchers was a barrier to reaching this potential in most (if not all) countries. However, some successful models of general practice research development in certain developed and underdeveloped nations

were presented and discussed in an effort to understand the necessary elements of success.

The meeting concluded that models with established value in driving general practice research development, transferring expertise, and building research capacity have the following characteristics:

1. They partner aspiring researchers and new research institutes with experienced researchers in mentoring relationships.

2. They establish practice-based research networks (PBRNs) to collect useable data and perform studies in the

general practice setting. PBRNs are essential to general practice research because they generate real-life questions and are a means of rapidly disseminating research-based recommendations into practice.

There was consensus that general practice research had so far largely failed to strategically 'market' its important and essential research results. This 'marketing' was necessary both to rouse the interest of practising general practitioners to participate in research and to convince others (other medical specialists, universities, funders, the medico-political world and the general public) of its rewards.

#### Developing countries have different needs

Underdeveloped nations may have acute knowledge needs that can be addressed by family medicine researchers. The Bosnia-Herzegovina project was frequently raised as a successful model for establishing a general practice research capacity in an underdeveloped country. For the last seven years a partnership between Queens University in Canada and the Bosnian family medicine leadership has built a framework for general practitioner training, delivery of primary health care services,

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and general practice research in war-torn Bosnia.

## Recommendations from the meeting

A comprehensive summary is available on the WONCA website.<sup>2</sup> Conference participants agreed that the WONCA executive should be asked to do the following:

1. Develop a strategy to display research achievements in family/general practice to patients, general practitioners, policy makers, health (insurance) authorities and academic leaders.
2. Seek the development in all its member countries of sentinel practice research networks that would conduct research on the health issues with greatest impact on general practice patients in each country.
3. Set up an expert group to provide advice on how to develop PBRNs in different countries.
4. Set up a clearing house to match general practice research experts with others seeking training and mentoring.

## General practice research is essential to shore up clinical primary health care/general practice in its role as the foundation of effective and efficient health care systems

5. Set international ethical standards for international research co-operation and clarify or develop an international ethical review process.
6. In any recommendations for general practice research address the specific needs of the developing world.

In response to the challenge by the *Lancet* editor, we feel that primary care research is under-represented in that journal. It is intriguing that the editorial board are not aware of the abundance of high quality primary health care research reports published by their competitors. Perhaps the best remedy is to in fact lobby more effectively directly to the editors (the toll bill is of course a barrier) and frequently send relevant articles for consideration. Deluge them with our paradigms if you will.

## Conclusion

This meeting holds promise as the first international meeting designed to develop strategy to advance general practice research in the world. As the international agency that has

led the development of general practice education over the last several decades, WONCA has now self-identified as the agency that will do the same for general practice research. Thirty-six developed and undeveloped countries, wealthy and very poor, agreed that this was a worthy and appropriate venture for WONCA – the only general practice organisation with an international mission. The task for the organisation now is to light the imagination of its members.

## Postscript

While you in New Zealand were enjoying the tail end of another beautiful Kiwi summer, we invite you to reflect on the sacrifices (!!) your representatives made in attending this meeting. Ngaire was forced to exchange jibes with the editor of the *Lancet* and tried to jog in temperatures of around 10 below (-18 with the wind chill). Susan, fortunately, does not jog. There was an awful lot of snow but the cold outside was inversely proportional to the warmth of our welcome and the friendliness of our hosts.

## Acknowledgement

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## References

1. Anonymous. Is primary-care research a lost cause? *Lancet* 2003; 361(9362):977
2. <http://www.globalfamilydoctor.com>