Summary of: The views of dentists on their participation in a primary care-based research trial

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FULL PAPER DETAILS

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Online article number E3

Refereed Paper – accepted 29 February 2008

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2008.584

©British Dental Journal 2008; 205: E3

Aims To determine the attitudes and opinions of dentists undertaking research in primary care dental practices, about the value of research in primary care. **Method** The data were collected during a face-to-face interview utilising a schedule of open and closed questions, which were used to guide the interview. **Results** Twenty-seven of the 40 primary care dentists (67.5%) who had participated in a five-year primary care clinical trial completed the interview. All the respondents believed that primary care research was important and should be of relevance to their practice, but only 12 (44%) thought it was important they carried out this research. The majority (96%) of respondents felt it did not pay financially to do research as a primary care practitioner and 12 (44%) thought research in primary care was too time consuming, but 25 (92%) were prepared to get involved in a primary care research group. Five (56%) salaried service (SS) practitioners and 14 (78%) general dental services (GDS) dentists felt they did not have enough experience, skills or knowledge to conduct their own research. Significantly more salaried dentists compared with GDS dentists felt adequately supported to do primary care research. **Conclusion** Future research in primary care should be focused on topics primary care practitioners feel of use to their clinical practice. A method of funding practitioners and providing time for them to complete research away from their clinical duties is necessary. There is a need for collaborative working with an academic institution, which can provide training and academic support for practitioners.

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

The disparity between the proportions of dental care and dental research carried out in the primary care setting is well known: while most dental treatment is provided via primary care, only a tiny number of research studies in dentistry are based in this sector. This is unfortunate, as the high proportion of primary dental care means that this is the most relevant setting to test new materials and techniques, and it is important that dental research translates well to primary care if it is to be ultimately useful to dental practice.

Some of the reasons for the small number of primary care-based research studies are highlighted in this paper by Hopper *et al.* They interviewed 27 primary care practitioners who had been involved with a five-year clinical trial to determine their views on the value of research in primary care. They found that while 92% were prepared to get

involved in a primary care research group, 96% felt it did not pay financially to do research as a primary care dentist, 44% thought it was too time-consuming and many interviewees felt they did not have enough skills, knowledge and experience to carry out their own research. It was interesting to note that more dentists in the salaried services felt adequately supported to do primary care research than those in the general dental service.

The three main problems are therefore clear: primary care practitioners need funding, time and training in order to encourage them to get involved with research studies. How to overcome these barriers may seem less clear, but in setting them out, this paper takes a first step. Despite the lack of financial incentives, there are dentists who are willing to participate in primary care-based research, as this paper shows. Now is the time to begin to address these

issues, through collaboration with academic institutions and discussions with primary care trusts.

For dentistry to be truly evidence-based, research must be relevant to primary practice. By understanding the attitudes of primary care practitioners to research, in time we may be able to improve funding and training and increase the numbers of dentists willing to participate.

The full paper can be accessed from the *BDJ* website (www.bdj.co.uk), under 'Research' in the table of contents for Volume 205 issue 2.

Rowena Milan,
Journal Editor

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2008.641

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IN BRIEF

- Future research in primary care should be focused on topics primary care practitioners feel of use to their clinical practice..
- Funding and protected time is necessary for primary care dental practitioners to complete research.
- There is a need for collaborative working between academic institutions and primary care dentists.

COMMENT

Around 90% of dental care in the UK is provided by primary care practitioners, yet only 2% of published research currently relates to primary dental care.¹ Consequently, further research is required in this area, along with a better understanding of the opportunities for and barriers to practitioner involvement in clinical research, since without the support of community-based dentists, much of this research would be difficult, if not impossible, to undertake.

This study explored the views of 27 primary care dentists, who had participated in a five year clinical trial, about research in primary care. All of those interviewed believed that primary care research was important and should be relevant to practice, but only 44% thought that they should actually carry out this research. While there was widespread support for primary care research groups, common obstacles to involvement in primary care research included financial disincentives (96%), time commitments (44%) and lack of appropriate skills or knowledge to conduct their own research (70%). The authors make several recommendations to help improve practitioner involvement in research, including exploring opportunities to fund and support practitioner led research, providing financial incentives to enter clinical trials and, perhaps most significantly, working collaboratively with academic institutions that could provide appropriate training and support.

However, further participant demographic information (eg length of time qualified) would have been useful, as it would have allowed for additional comparison of opinions. Furthermore, these participants had already been involved in a lengthy clinical trial and were therefore, arguably, already positively predisposed to research. The views of this sample group should not, therefore, be assumed to be representative of primary care practitioners as a whole. Consequently, there is scope for further related research (eg the views of practitioners who have not taken part in any clinical research) that could help increase understanding in this area further.

Promoting research mindedness among practitioners is essential if clinical practice is to be truly based on best available evidence. A greater understanding of practitioner perspectives, as demonstrated in this study, could, therefore, help to inform training and recruitment of GDPs involved in practice-based research.

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1. Clarkson J. Experience of clinical trials in general dental practice. *Adv Dent Res* 2005; **18**: 39–41.

AUTHOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**1. Why did you undertake this research?**

Having undertaken a primary care dental research clinical trial, questions arose as to the views of the primary care dentists about their experience of undertaking research, the behaviour of the dentists involved in the trial and why issues had arisen. In particular, an understanding from the primary care dentists' perspective was needed, and felt to be lacking in the dental literature.

2. What would you like to do next in this area to follow on from this work?

Further research needs to be undertaken to develop our understanding of how to run high quality clinical trials in primary care. A better understanding of the views of primary care dentists, academic researchers and their teams needs to be developed by undertaking qualitative interviews. It would also be beneficial to embed qualitative research in primary care trials to help to improve the research experience and quality of the research. This could help to improve feasibility, protocols and methods of joint working, thus improving the overall quality of the research. Research also needs to be undertaken into what types of research primary care dentists are prepared to be involved in, their level of involvement, the duration of trials that are appropriate and the nature of support that is required.