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Practical research to improve care

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Improving health care is always a challenge, but having practitioners who can reflect on their own work, research the problems they encounter, try out and evaluate innovative ideas is a good beginning. The papers in this special issue of the *Australian Journal of Primary Health* were first presented at the Primary Health Care Research Conference held in Darwin from 30 June–2 July 2010 with the theme *Primary health care research and health reform: Improving care*. These papers address some of the principal issues facing Australian primary health care: workforce, access, ageing, prevention and management of chronic disease, and building research capacity.

A feature of these papers is that many authors are clinically qualified as general practitioners, medical educators, nurses, pharmacists, an exercise scientist, and a dietician. The rigour and relevance of these studies has been enhanced by partnerships between clinicians and academics in universities and primary health organisations. The authors have systematically investigated problems in many settings, with varied populations such as obese children or elderly people, and activities ranging from health promotion to rural palliative care. Their research methods are many and various. The results of these studies can potentially make considerable difference to primary care practice

and policy, with publication being a vital step in making the work widely accessible.

While the diversity of primary health care research is one of its strengths, it makes it difficult to establish the standing of Australian primary health care research from the results of the first Excellence in Research Australian (ERA) report on the quality of research in Australian universities over 6 years from 2003 to 2008. The fields of research at the heart of the ERA scheme belong to a discipline based classification, but primary health care includes many disciplines as the papers in this issue illustrate. Primary health care research conceivably fits into at least two of the broad areas assessed under medical and health sciences – biomedical and clinical health sciences, and public and allied health sciences, and into several of the subcategories of these areas. However, lack of visible profile in ERA does not mean lack of importance – primary health care research is vital for continuing improvement of this fundamental part of the health care system.

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