

Editorial Issue 4 2012

Answering questions

The questions in primary health care are many and various. Why do few GPs agree to train in opioid substitution therapy, and even if they do, prescribe to few or no patients? What changes are needed to improve outcomes in the care of unsettled babies and their families in the first few months of life? Why has there been low engagement in a parenting program by families from culturally diverse populations? Does screening for abdominal aortic aneurysms affect men's quality of life? Do rural primary care nurses feel equipped for palliative care? After a trial, how can cardiovascular absolute risk management be sustained in Australian general practice? The research in this issue of *Australian Journal of Primary Health* exemplifies that much primary health care research and evaluation starts with a practical question that needs to be answered to improve health care delivery or policy.

To address such practice questions, many papers in this issue use well designed qualitative research to examine the perspectives of patients or of service providers from different disciplines. Through understanding their situation and attitudes, strategies can then be developed that are appropriate to the context of patients and providers, and therefore more likely to be effective. Addressing policy questions at a system level takes different methods. Gibson *et al.* address whether Enhanced Primary Care affects the regularity and/or frequency of GP contact with older patients using linked administrative health records of hospital and

primary care services. Russell *et al.* identify factors that contribute to the retention of GPs in rural and remote areas by analysing two Australian GP workforce datasets.

Through publication in this journal, all of these papers now contribute to the evidence base of primary health care. However, retrieving relevant literature can be difficult for practitioners, researchers and policy advisors. Tieman's paper describes how a PubMed filter and a GP hub can provide immediate access when needed to palliative care information and evidence through the CareSearch website <http://www.caresearch.com.au>. For those wanting to retrieve a broader range of relevant literature, a primary health care PubMed filter is now available at <http://www.phcris.org.au/phcsearchfilter/>.

Now that authors of these papers have articulated the answers they found to their practical questions, and these answers are being made public, what happens next? Will individuals, organisations or institutions be able to follow up on recommendations and incorporate them in their own sphere of action? Beyond contributing to the evidence base, the ultimate value of primary health care research lies in the difference it can make to practice and policy.

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