Offline: How to save primary care research

Some years ago, I attended a meeting of WONCA in the cold, remote wastelands of Canada. WONCA is the World Organization of National Colleges, Academies, and Academic Associations of General Practitioners/Family Physicians. The objective of the 3-day conference was to produce a research strategy for primary care. But instead of a positive discussion about important research questions to be asked and inventive ways one might choose to answer them, it became a festival of complaint about the victimisation of general practitioners—how they were ignored and marginalised, powerless and poor, misjudged and misunderstood. After 72 h trapped in this snowbound enclave, a reasonable person might have decided never to open the dark and depressing closet of primary care research ever again. But then Lars Lindholm called.

Instead of grumbling, Lars brought together the Universities of Umeå, Linköping, and Göteborg in 2009 to create Sweden’s first National Research School in General Practice. The goal of the School, funded by the Swedish Research Council, was to upgrade the quality of research in general practice by recruiting a new generation of brilliantly trained researchers. The School wanted to change the culture of general practice research in Sweden by establishing a creative and sustainable environment for study. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research would be encouraged. And research students would not be exposed only to Swedish general practice research. They would be given opportunities to work side-by-side research mentors overseas at international centres of excellence. Since 2010, 50 PhD students have joined the School. Ten more are joining this month. Half will complete a “pre-doc”. The research students are not all doctors. There are six nurses, three physiotherapists, three psychologists, and two occupational therapists. Although the programme began with only three medical schools, now Örebro, Uppsala, Lund, and (to a lesser extent) Karolinska take part too. Advanced courses are provided in quantitative and qualitative methods, screening and prevention, and implementation science. The “pre-doc” is not like a student elective; it is a 2–3-month research attachment designed with a specific project in mind. The 2014 “pre-docs” worked in Chicago, Melbourne, Sydney, Pretoria, Las Vegas, Nijmegen, Edinburgh, and Southampton. Further attachments are planned in Phoenix and Auckland. The School has delivered at least three unique opportunities for its students. First, research collaborations overseas, with exposure to new attitudes, techniques, and facilities. Second, access to senior scientists outside their own university and field of study. Third, personal tuition on writing research and getting published. The School has already defeated one of the worst afflictions in science—unproductive competition (or “harassing each other”, as Lars Lindholm put it). Pro-Deans Lars Dahlén (Lund University) spoke of the importance of cooperation at a time when national health systems were becoming increasingly fragmented; Patrik Danielson (Umeå University) emphasised the School’s aim to produce national research leaders; and Eric Hanse (Göteborg University) stressed the value of internationalisation.

The proof of these fine ambitions is, of course, in the research itself. 13 students have defended their doctoral theses successfully so far. Last week in Gothenburg, the School came together to showcase the findings of its newest students—overdiagnosis of abdominal aortic aneurysm, the role of religious belief in medical care, nutrition in Swedish nursing homes, among many other projects. The School could evolve in several directions. If stretched, funding from the Swedish Research Council will last until 2017. The immediate challenge is therefore to secure long-term financial security. But beyond survival, one can also envisage the School becoming a national accountability mechanism for Swedish primary care, building the means to monitor and review progress and setbacks in health-care delivery outside the hospital. The Swedish National Research School has also inspired others. Several scientific disciplines in Sweden plan to adopt the same idea of a national research school. In 2013, the Norwegian Research Council funded a Norwegian Research School in General Practice, modelled on that of its Swedish neighbour. Under the banner of “Building Bridges to Lift a Specialty”, this Swedish initiative deserves to be studied and copied widely as a means to strengthen primary care research. At long last, it’s time to put complaining behind us.

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