Pharmacy practice research has an impact on each and every pharmacist

In this first in a series of three articles on research, Rachel Roberts and Erika Kennington, research strategy co-ordinators for the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, explains that research is not just for academics but is about real issues that affect patients and pharmacists.

As part of its 100-day commitments, the new professional body for pharmacy has made a commitment to advance the science and practice research base for pharmacy and healthcare. Most readers may believe that this commitment does not apply to them specifically; that research is something done by others, whose findings may or may not eventually reach pharmacists working in the “real world”. Although the value of academic research cannot be understated, it is important to realise that a great deal of research is conducted at grass roots level and the findings of such research can often impact on pharmacy practitioners in all settings.

This is the first in a series of three articles intended to illustrate how research is already part of everyday pharmacy practice. We want to show how individual practitioners can engage more fully in research so that they can:

- Strengthen the services they provide
- Build the evidence base for developing and commissioning new services
- Improve patient care
- Contribute to the knowledge base within health service research more widely
- Gain both professionally and personally in the process

Through these articles we wish to engender a culture change by which all pharmacists will identify research as a core part of their normal daily practice. Research is about real issues that affect pharmacists and the patients they see every day.

Secondly, we wish to emphasise the need for increased pharmacy practice research in order to meet the policy aspirations for pharmacy throughout Britain and to lead pharmacy practice in the direction pharmacists wish to take it.

Thirdly, we recognise that many pharmacists who want to become involved in research do not know where to start, what to expect, or where to find the sources of support and expertise they need.

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society science and research team is developing research support and guidance material designed specifically for pharmacy practitioners. These are due to be launched in May and will be freely available to all members online and as hard copies via local practice forums and the new professional body’s information and advisory service.

There is often a great deal of debate about what research is and what it is not. These debates can include discussion around the ways in which audit differs from research or on the differences between research and service evaluation. Our intention here is not to focus on these debates but instead to provide a broad definition of research that pharmacists can recognise as being applicable to their daily practice and can begin engaging with. This does not mean that we wish to provide a “dumbed down” version of research or that we want to encourage pharmacists to engage in research that will not stand up to scrutiny. Research must always be systematic, objective and, ideally, free of biases. However, there is overlap between audit, service evaluation and research and we want to highlight these links, for example, by showing how audit can be viewed as a stepping stone to research and how data collected as part of a local service evaluation can be further developed to inform a more robust and generalisable study.

A useful definition of pharmacy practice research has been provided by the King’s Fund (1997), which describes it as “research which attempts to inform and understand pharmacy and the way in which it is practised, in order to support the objectives of pharmacy practice and to ensure that pharmacists’ knowledge and skills are used to best effect in solving the problems of the health service and meeting the health needs of the population”.

This broad definition allows us to view pharmacy practice research as something that can encompass both large-scale, multi-site projects and small-scale projects undertaken to improve understanding of local or practice-specific issues. Indeed, research is not something that only happens in universities. Research methods are increasingly being used to measure and understand local health needs and to assess the effectiveness of services in meeting those needs. A good understanding of these issues can give focus to local campaigns for change and can act as the driver behind commissioning new services, in terms of justifying both the need for, and the effectiveness and value of these services.

Research within normal practice

Patients are at the heart of pharmacy and all pharmacy professionals strive to improve the quality of their existing services and to develop new ones that benefit their patients. Often this is hampered by a lack of easily accessible evidence both locally — within primary care trusts, local health boards and...
Key points

- The new professional body for pharmacy is committed to advancing the science and practice research base for pharmacy and healthcare.
- Research is not just for academics.
- A great deal of research takes place at grass roots level.
- Research findings can impact on all sectors of the pharmacy profession.
- A culture change is needed whereby pharmacists see research as a core part of their normal daily practice.
- There is a need for more practice research to help the profession meet its aspirations.
- Pharmacists need help and advice about how to get involved.

Developing the pharmacy profession

The Department of Health’s 2008 pharmacy White Paper states that “in order for pharmacy to become an established voice in primary care and to be recognised as a key and essential element in the delivery of clinical services, a sound evidence base that demonstrates how pharmacy delivers effective, high quality and value for money services is needed”.

There is a need for practice research to inform a larger study, ultimately influencing the data and findings generated could be used to inform evidence-based practice.

In the next article we will incorporate examples of how pharmacy practice research can be carried out by:

- Conducting research that explores issues relevant to practice.
- Developing services and evaluating them in terms of clinical outcomes, patient satisfaction and value for money.
- Encouraging more pharmacists to increase their involvement in research.

Royal Pharmaceutical Society, said: “The recent changes in the professional role of pharmacy, which have added a clinical cognitive perspective to the traditional dispensing and supply role, make appropriate use of pharmacists’ detailed knowledge of medicines and their expertise in interacting with patients. These new roles have built on both small and large scale projects demonstrating the contribution of pharmacy to better patient care and have evolved in line with service need. To maintain this momentum and ensure pharmacy continues to take its place in a constantly changing health care environment, research is necessary to identify areas of sub optimal health care and to demonstrate how pharmacy can provide solutions.”

In order to build the evidence base needed to develop the pharmacy profession, collaborative working is needed between governments, contract negotiators, universities and the professional body. In essence, a combination of a bottom-up and top-down approach is required.

Catherine Duggan, director of professional support and development at the Society, said: “Research is central to the profession and its development. Pharmacists’ play a key role in delivering high quality, patient-centred care and we need to evidence these interventions so that patients and the public benefit further from our unique skills and expertise. For this to happen, engagement in research across all sectors, in a variety of ways, is required.

“I hope that these articles, and the research support and guidance materials being developed by the science and research team, will encourage more pharmacists to increase their involvement.”

References