

The Primary Care Research Program of AHCPR

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Late in 1989, Congress created the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR), making a strong statement of support for primary care research in the United States. The AHCPR has been given agency status within the US Public Health Service (PHS) similar to that of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The agency has received funding to study the effectiveness of preventive, diagnostic, and therapeutic strategies employed in health and medical care. More generally, the AHCPR funds analyses of the organization, financing, and delivery of health care services in order to enhance the quality, effectiveness, appropriateness, and access to such services. The agency is also charged with influencing health care practice through the development and dissemination of practice guidelines.

The primary care mission of the AHCPR is coordinated through the Division of Primary Care within the Center for General Health Services Extramural Research. The program defines primary care as an array of services that are accessible and acceptable to the patient, comprehensive in scope, and coordinated and continuous over time, and for which the physician is accountable for quality and potential effects. Within this framework, analyses along a wide range of topics are authorized, including those associated with the organization, delivery, content, processes, practices, and outcomes of primary care. Several research areas are addressed by AHCPR's authorizing legislation.

Clinical practice. More study is needed of the natural history of common problems in the relatively unselected patient populations typical of primary care practices. This area of research also includes studies that examine appropriate levels of care for those conditions.

Effectiveness of care. Effectiveness of care is a major research initiative of AHCPR. The agency will support studies of the effectiveness of a wide variety of preventive,

diagnostic, and treatment strategies. Medical procedures in common use, as well as high cost procedures, are particular targets for study.

Nonmedical mediators of outcome. To complement the medical effectiveness research, studies are required of the nonmedical factors that govern change in health status. Of particular interest is the impact of family, ethnic, vocational, and other social influences on the processes and outcomes of care. Studies of the physician-patient relationship also are critical to further understanding their mediating effect on health outcomes.

Underserved populations. Studies that examine innovative strategies for providing high quality primary care in rural areas and in other underserved areas are a particular priority. Similarly, studies of innovations in the care of special populations, particularly the elderly, mothers and children, ethnic minorities, individuals with HIV infection, persons with disabilities, and impaired persons dependent on long-term care, will receive priority for funding.

Practice-oriented research. Studies will be supported that examine the factors that influence patient health-related behaviors, particularly those related to utilization of services and compliance with physician and public health recommendations. Studies are needed of the factors that influence primary care provider behavior and determine practice patterns. Clinical decision making, patient referrals, and consultation practice are of particular interest. Studies are also encouraged that examine factors that influence choice of career, specialty, location, style of practice, and satisfaction with that practice.

Dissemination of practice guidelines. In addition to its research program, the AHCPR is charged with developing and disseminating practice guidelines for a number of selected conditions. To support this work, studies are needed of the process by which new practice patterns, as well as appropriate technology, are disseminated among practitioners. Studies are also required that describe current practice patterns, as well as those that develop and test strategies to enhance dissemination.

Research methods in primary care. Finally, the pro-

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gram plans to support research that contributes to improved approaches to the study of critical issues in primary care. Issues such as coding and classification systems for common conditions, measurement of functional status, and measurement of outcomes of episodes of care are of critical importance to research in primary care. Development of methods to study medical decision making in primary care and for measuring patient preferences is also encouraged. The program also supports the development of techniques for meta-analysis and quasi-experimental research designs for the study of conditions not appropriately examined by clinical trials.

The AHCPR also has made a commitment to developing the capacity for research in primary care, although the optimal strategy for achieving this objective is not clear. The Task Force on Building the Capacity for Research in Primary Care has been established, with leaders from family medicine, general internal medicine, and general pediatrics, as well as from nursing and dentistry, and has been charged with producing a report by the spring of 1991.

The Primary Care Division has sponsored two annual primary care research conferences to promote sharing of research approaches, methods, and results across

the several disciplines involved in primary care research. The first was held in Colorado Springs in March 1990 and focused on developing an integrated research agenda for primary care. The second was held in San Diego in January 1991 and focused on research approaches, methods, and measures important to primary care. Proceedings from the first conference, "Primary Care Research: An Agenda for the 90s," are available on request. Proceedings of the second conference are in preparation and will be available by May.

The AHCPR produces regular publications describing its research interests and activities. The Division of Primary Care has recently issued two Program Notes: the first details the research agenda for primary care in general and the second focuses on research in rural health care. These and other publications of the AHCPR may be requested through the Publications and Information Branch, Room 18-12 Parklawn Bldg, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857, (301) 443-4100. Additional information on the primary care research program can be obtained from staff members of the Division of Primary Care of AHCPR, Room 630, 2101 E Jefferson, Rockville, MD 20852, (301) 443-2080.