

How the Scottish School of Primary Care can help pharmacists

Margaret Watson and Lucy McCloughan say the SSPC recognises the importance of a multiprofessional approach to primary care

Why, you may ask, should pharmacists be interested in research? The answer is that primary care research needs to reflect the contributions of all the various providers of primary health care, whether pharmacists, nurses, GPs, dentists or allied health professionals. Research is needed to derive evidence to inform what we do in our daily practice and, perhaps more importantly, what we do not do. Health care needs to be effective and efficient and often the only way to determine this is to conduct a research study or to be equipped to use evidence already in existence.

The volume of pharmacy practice research is growing due to the greater recognition among the profession (as well as other primary care professional groups) of the need to provide evidence of the effectiveness of services in order to seek payment for their provision. For example, the 2002 "Strategy for pharmaceutical care in Scotland"¹ called for an increase in research for service redesign and for better integration and co-ordination of services.

Pharmacy practice research is often led by researchers based in academic institutions, with community pharmacists (and their staff) acting as participants. As more pharmacists acknowledge not only the importance but also the need for pharmacy practice research, perhaps more will become involved in research activities. It is to be hoped that these activities will include the initiation of research projects to address questions that arise from everyday practice, as well as leading research studies on a whole range of relevant issues. It is also important to involve community pharmacists in deriving research ideas and undertaking and leading some research.

A good example of community pharmacists getting involved in research is the Grampian Pharmacy Network, which has existed for six years. Participation in this network is voluntary and to date has tended to involve community pharmacists and their

staff as participants in research studies. Community pharmacists in this network have been involved at different stages of the research process. Many pharmacists participate in research studies, which have included data collection, patient recruitment and participation in educational interventions. These pharmacists have also been involved in the generation of ideas and their formulation into research questions, which have been tested in studies. A recent study on the outcomes of prescribed and purchased treatment for hay fever was initiated and directed by network pharmacists. Studies that are conducted in community pharmacy need to be practical, and network pharmacists have used their expertise and experience to contribute to the study design, as well as piloting different methods to determine which is the most appropriate to be used in the study.

Scottish School of Primary Care

In addition to locally initiated networks for those who are interested in research, pharmacists can also benefit from national organisations such as the Scottish School of Primary Care (SSPC). SSPC is a national organisation promoting the provision and relevance of high quality research evidence, and the increase of research capacity and capability for all primary care professionals across Scotland. It is funded by the Scottish Executive Health Department, and comprises part of the new Special Health Board, NHS Education for Scotland (NES). SSPC was initiated in 2000 following the recommendations made in a report into Scottish primary care called "Shaping the future: a primary care research and development strategy for Scotland".² Specifically, the report recommended that the school should be set up to work with other national organisations to "provide a strategic overview which would facilitate the expansion of different R&D activities in primary care throughout Scotland".

Since its foundation in 2000, SSPC has received support from a wide range of professional organisations, including:

- Scottish Executive Health Department
- Scottish Higher Education Funding Committee
- Scottish Council for Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education (now part of NES)
- National Board for Nursing (now part of NES)
- Clinical Standards Board for Scotland (now part of Quality Improvement Scotland)

- Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network
- Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain
- Royal College of General Practitioners
- Faculty of General Dental Practitioners

Currently, SSPC has four main research programmes: (i) organisation of care, (ii) evaluative research, (iii) cancer research in primary care, and (iv) family-based and primary care epidemiology. Further details of the individual studies are available on the website (www.sspc.uk.com) and in the annual report (www.sspc.uk.com/pdf/sspc_AR_2003.pdf).

Research capability

The school aims to support the training of all primary care professionals, including pharmacists, to enable them to participate in and undertake high quality research. Indeed the need for more research skills, particularly in primary care pharmacy, has recently been highlighted in the Scottish strategy "The right medicine". The school is pursuing a systematic approach to such education, training and career development, something we call "research capability". This means ensuring that all those involved in providing and using research evidence have the appropriate level of skill to do so. A key part of this work involves developing a strategy outlining the different skills that people should develop depending on their desired involvement in research. For example, it is expected that most primary care professionals should be able to use evidence in their everyday practice, even if they do not wish to carry out their own research, that is, they should be "research aware". The skills needed for this would include being able to find the appropriate literature and being able to appraise it critically. A smaller number of professionals might be "research interested" and wish to get involved in someone else's research (like those in the Grampian Pharmacy Network, for example). These professionals will need skills such as basic data collection techniques and consent procedures in research. A smaller number may be "research active" and interested in developing their own research ideas, perhaps by taking a research degree. Advanced research active people often become research leaders where they will need to develop supervisory skills and an understanding of where research fits into national and international programmes. These different levels of research involvement and the skills needed to be involved in each level are illustrated in Figure 1.

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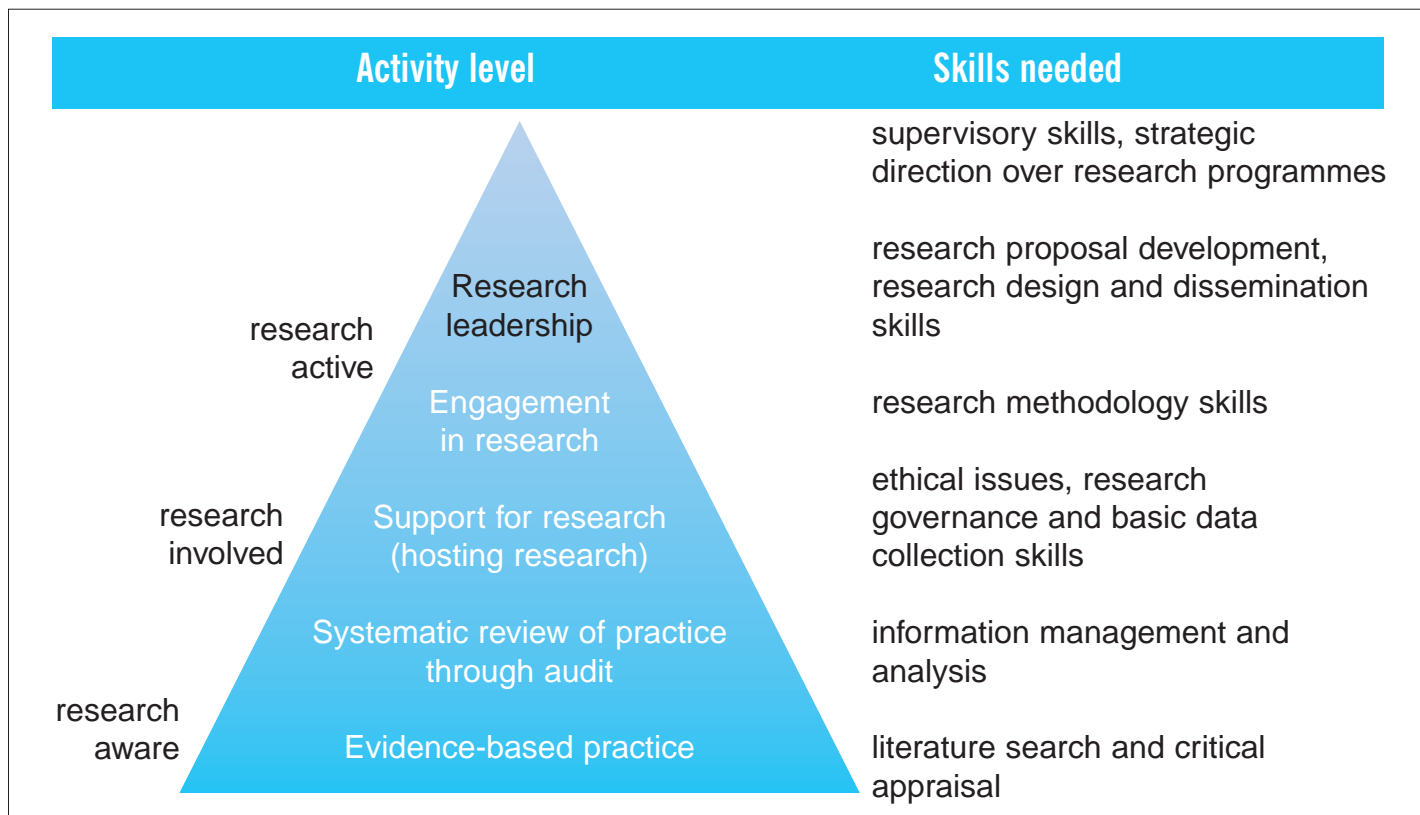


Figure 1: SSPC's approach to research skills training for different levels of activity

The school is actively working with a number of organisations to ensure that the opportunities exist for primary care professionals to gain access to the different levels of research skill. For example, we are working with the primary care trust research managers, primary care research networks and NES to develop research courses for research aware and research active people. The school co-ordinates the Scottish MSc in primary care (see www.dundee.ac.uk/generalpractice/pcmssc), which also provides an ever-expanding number of masters level research courses which can be studied as single modules for those who wish to embark on their own research studies. For potential research leaders, the school is working with its European partners to create and access advanced research courses, and also with NES to facilitate career pathways for professionals wanting to progress to this stage.

Capacity building

Capacity building means making sure that the structures and processes exist so that research can be carried out. This is particularly important in primary care because research in this sector is difficult to carry out. There are several reasons for this:

- Most primary care research is led by researchers based in universities who are remote from, and unknown to, the patients they are trying to access.
- The dispersed nature of primary care means that relatively small numbers of patients are attached to small professional units throughout Scotland.
- There is little incentive for primary care

professionals to be involved in other people's research.

- Primary care service provision is funded through independent (eg, GPs, community pharmacists) and salaried practitioners (eg, community nurses). This has made it difficult to establish large, co-ordinated primary care groups to attract critical support funding and to promote higher levels of research activity.

To overcome the difficulties in carrying out research in primary care, SSPC has worked as a catalyst with NHS primary care trusts, existing primary care research networks and universities to create a new framework called SPPIRe (Scottish Practices and Professionals Involved in Research). The purpose of SPPIRe is to increase the amount of research undertaken in primary care settings that is relevant to patient care. SPPIRe will comprise professionals and practices that are interested in research. A register is being constructed of practices and professionals that are willing to participate in research either as hosts or as more active participants. This is being designed so that investigators carrying out high quality research can approach SPPIRe to access collaborators for their studies. Although SPPIRe is being led at a national level by SSPC, the face-to-face contact with professionals interested in research is being led by four local co-ordinators who are based in one of four regional "nodes": Aberdeen, Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh.

Further information about SPPIRe can be obtained from one of us (LMcC) at lucy.mc-cloughan@nes.scot.nhs.uk.

Other SSPC activities

The Scottish School of Primary Care holds a conference in central Scotland every spring during which health professionals from all different specialties present their research ideas and results. The conference is an excellent opportunity for anyone who is interested in research to attend, to learn more about the SSPC, or to discuss possible future research initiatives.

Pharmacists wishing to learn more about the SSPC should go to the website in the first instance (www.sspc.uk.com). This has a vast source of information providing details about the SSPC, recent developments, training opportunities (organised by regional and level of experience). There is also information about sources of funding.

Any pharmacists who would like to get involved in the school, to develop primary care research, or to contribute ideas or experience can contact the school through its website.

The success of the SSPC depends on the active participation of health professionals and social scientists. This is an excellent opportunity for the pharmacy profession to be involved in the future of primary health care.

References

1. Scottish Executive. The right medicine: a strategy for pharmaceutical care in Scotland. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive; 2002.
2. Shaping the future: a primary care research and development strategy for Scotland. Available at: www.sspc.uk.com (accessed 17 December 2003).