

The Research Advisory Service— what it is and what it does

These notes aim to show how the College, through its Research Advisory Service in Birmingham, can help doctors in all fields of medicine, and workers in other disciplines whose interests lead them into the field of general practice. The Unit's service is offered irrespective of college membership.

The Research Unit in Birmingham is only one among a number of sources to which those seeking help with research problems may turn. In addition to the other Units of the College, in Dundee, Manchester, and the Epidemic Observation Unit, there are active research committees in some Faculties. There are also University Departments of general practice in many medical schools. Enquirers are able to approach any of these bodies in confident expectation of willing help.

Introduction

The Birmingham Research Unit of the College evolved from the Records and Statistics Unit formed in the late 1950s. Early work showed that given good methods, doctors in practice could record accurately. In our first decade methods were worked out, tested in practice, and introduced on an international scale. Some of these methods have become the accepted standardised procedures to be used when hard epidemiological data are needed from practice.

As the number of contacts with practitioners and others increased, experience developed of the range of problems which interested general practitioners. The Unit began to devise specialised custom-built methods to be used by singlehanded doctors as well as for those working in small groups.

Data from general practice may be large in amount though they may not be detailed. We had to learn how sophisticated methods of data handling could be best used. Experience was gained in the design of studies using modern methods both of design and data processing and contacts were established with experts in epidemiology, statistics, and computer science.

The Unit learned from its own work. Major studies carried out at a national level were devised in the Unit itself. It continues to be the task of the Unit to initiate, conduct, analyse, consider and report on its own projects from time to time. More often than not, however, we advise and help with studies by individuals or groups, which naturally remain their own and in which our involvement is purely catalytic or advisory.

What we do not do

The Research Unit and its Advisory Service do not finance research. This may be available on application from the Research Foundation of the College, or several other sources. We do, however, help to prepare applications for finance.

Clinical trials of therapeutic substances are not one of our priorities, though again we act in helping to make contacts.

We do not undertake technical research involving laboratory work of any kind. We have no direct access to clinical laboratories and therefore can only help such access.

What the Service is

The Research Unit and Advisory Service operate from an office in Birmingham, Lordwoods House, 54 Lordwood Road, Harborne, Birmingham, B17 9DB. The College is enabled to offer its Advisory Services through the Unit by a grant from the Department of Health and Social Security.

The present professional staff consists of the Honorary Director (Dr D. L. Crombie), the Honorary Research Adviser (Dr R. J. F. H. Pinsent) and Research Fellow (Dr D. Fleming), all of whom are principals active in general practice.

There is a small administrative and statistical staff (Mr B. T. Brueton, Administrative Officer) and secretariat.

The Lordswood (Dr Crombie) and Birchfield (Dr Pinsent) study practices serve as workshops for the trial of new research methods and as media for demonstrating and teaching the use of standard procedures and new record systems.

The Birchfield Study Practice is at 145 Birchfield Road, Birmingham, B19 1LH and accommodates the office of the Research Adviser.

How the Service works

People with problems usually approach the Unit by letter and correspondence follows which may resolve the matter or take it a stage further.

Members of the Unit's staff may visit practices to advise on the introduction of new systems of documenting research.

When a near final draft protocol is being prepared for submission to a grant-giving body the Unit can advise on format, layout and help with schedules of cost.

An idea may reach the Unit at the stage of a draft protocol. At this point the proposer may usefully visit Birmingham for discussion with the professional advisers, Unit staff and such specialist advisers as may be called in.

Under certain circumstances the Unit will undertake the analysis of data from outside studies. If a standard procedure can be applied to a research problem the analysis is made easier and less costly. The Unit can sometimes arrange for special printing of research documents to be done economically. Equipment for operating standard methods of research data can be obtained, at cost, through the Unit.

No consulting fee is charged by the advisory service.

What the Service likes

Where a research project in which the Unit has been involved reaches publication, appropriate acknowledgement is requested.

The Unit maintains its own reprint library and hopes to receive reprints of reports of all studies which it has assisted. The Unit may from time to time approach those who have sought its advice with a request to be informed of the current status of the project. If the Research Unit is to advise usefully it needs feedback of information about how much use its advice and help have been to proposers of studies.

As the Unit maintains the highest standard of professional confidentiality, information sought in this way will be for internal use only.

Addresses

The Research Unit and Advisory Service, Lordswood House, 54 Lordswood Road, Harborne, Birmingham, B17 9DB. Tel.: 021 426 1125.

Dr D. L. Crombie, *O.B.E.* (Harborne Study Practice), 54 Lordswood Road, Birmingham, B17 9DB. Tel.: 021 426 1125.

Dr R. J. F. H. Pinsent, *O.B.E.* (Birchfield Study Practice), 145 Birchfield Road, Birmingham, B19 1LH. Tel.: 021 554 1081.

FURTHER READING

Pinsent, R. J. F. H. (1968). *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, **16**, 127.

Research Unit of the Royal College of General Practitioners (1971). *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, **21**, 609-612.

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