

THE RCGP & Boots The Chemists are once again delighted to be able to present an excellent paper as the 2003 Research Paper of the Year. The paper 'The duration of acute cough in pre-school children presenting to primary care: a prospective cohort study',¹ by Alastair Hay, Andrew Wilson, Tom Fahey and Tim Peters, published in *Family Practice*, has all the characteristics we look for — originality, rigour, and relevance to general practice. It shows several things which are well known to academic primary care, but often go unnoticed by research funders and clinicians; first, that good research in general practice relies on strong practice-based research networks, where access to, and recruitment of, large numbers of patients can be relied upon. Secondly, that the least fashionable and most common conditions are still worth re-examining, because many of our working assumptions are inaccurate. Thirdly, that there is now a long tradition of primary care epidemiology, with similar studies going back 40 years including John Fry's *Profiles of disease* (1966),² Howie and Hutchison's paper (1978),³ Howie and Bigg's paper (1980)⁴ and Toop, Howie and Paxton's paper (1986),⁵ which remind us that primary care research is now a well established field.

References

1. Hay AD, Wilson A, Fahey T, Peters TJ. The duration of acute cough in pre-school children presenting to primary care: a prospective cohort study. *Fam Pract* 2003; **20**: 696-705.
2. Fry J. *Profiles of disease: a study in the natural history of common diseases*. Edinburgh: Livingstone, 1966.
3. Howie JGR, Hutchinson KR. Antibiotics and respiratory illness in general practice: prescribing policy and workload. *BMJ* 1978 **2(6148)**: 1342
4. Howie JGR, Bigg AR. Family trends in psychotropic and antibiotic prescribing in general practice. *BMJ* 1980; **280(6217)**: 836-838.
5. Toop LJ, Howie JGR, Paxton FM. Night cough and general practice research. *J R Coll Gen Pract* 1986; **36(283)**: 74-77.
6. Charles-Jones H, Latimer J, May C. Transforming general practice: the redistribution of medical work in primary care. *Social Health Illn* 2003; **25**: 71-92.

The panel set up to review the entries also liked this paper because of its value to the whole primary care team. The reviewing panel is multidisciplinary, and was agreed that pharmacists, practice nurses and health visitors would use its findings as well as GPs and patients. It was clearly written, even though it used multiple methods and had some moderately complex material to analyse.

It inevitably leaves some questions — how reliable was the measure? What is the explanation for the link between prior and post-duration of cough? What about the apparent association with daycare? And we must leave our colleagues to find out whether feeding back these findings WILL help parents to self-manage, or clinicians to avoid inappropriate prescribing: but we congratulate the authors on their important work.

We must also mention a contrasting paper to which we gave a 'highly commended', in recognition of its originality and intellectual

challenge. This paper, 'Transforming general practice: the redistribution of medical work in primary care' by Huw Charles-Jones, Joanna Latimer and Carl May,⁶ published in *Sociology of Health and Illness*, was a good qualitative piece looking at the changes being wrought in primary care by the increasing tendency to use GPs as an in-practice referral 'consultant'. The authors explore contrasting views of practice managers, nurses and GPs on their emergent roles, concluding that new policies on triage and rapid access tend to a reductionist use of the GP as a biomedical specialist, and threatening the biographical or patient-centred practice of medicine. They are suitably neutral about the extent to which this matters, but their work draws attention to the implications of service alterations that are being made, and allows us to consider further research needed to explore these consequences. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge a purely qualitative paper, an approach that offers much to our understanding, and its publishers, who figured for the first time on our shortlist for this award.

In conclusion, we thank the sponsors, the submitting authors, and the panel for another excellent round of this award.

The Research Group is now inviting entries for the 2004 Research Paper of the Year Award. Nominations may be submitted at any time until the closing date of 14 January 2005. If you have read a paper (published since 1 January this year) which has a GP author based in the UK or Eire, which you believe to have an important message for general practice, and whose findings could be easily implemented within a service practice setting, then please do nominate it now. The criteria against which the panel will be reviewing entries are: originality, applicability, scientific standing, and presentation.

More information can be found on the research pages on the College website: <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/research/paperoftheyear/index.asp>.

Alternatively, contact Fenny Green, Research Administrator (fgreen@rcgp.org.uk) who will be happy to provide you with information on how to nominate a paper.

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