The Research Paper of the Year (RPY), awarded by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), gives recognition to an individual or group of researchers who have undertaken and published an exceptional piece of research relating to general practice or primary care. The three categories are Clinical Research, Health Services Research (including implementation and public health) and Medical Education with relevance to primary care. Papers are scored on the criteria of originality, impact, contribution to the reputation of general practice, scientific approach, and presentation.

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OVERALL WINNER: CLINICAL RESEARCH
For RPY 2021, we received 50 submissions — some truly excellent papers. The overall winner of the RPY award 2021 was from category 1 (Clinical Research): Antibiotics for lower respiratory tract infection in children presenting in primary care in England (ARTIC PC): a double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled trial.

This study was led by Paul Little from the University of Southampton, and demonstrated that amoxicillin for uncomplicated chest infections in children is unlikely to be clinically effective either overall or for key subgroups in whom antibiotics are commonly prescribed. The authors conclude that unless pneumonia is suspected, clinicians should not prescribe antibiotics for most children presenting with chest infections. The authors emphasise the need for safety-netting advice — encouraging parents to monitor their child and provide advice about when to consult again.

“...The authors conclude that unless pneumonia is suspected, clinicians should not prescribe antibiotics for most children presenting with chest infections. The authors emphasise the need for safety-netting advice — encouraging parents to monitor their child and provide advice about when to consult again.”

The key role primary care must play in antibiotic stewardship. GP trainees will need to learn to manage uncertainty and risk, and become confident in safety netting.

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TWO HIGHLY-COMMENDED PAPERS
Two papers were highly commended by the panel judging category 1 papers: Risk of thrombocytopenia and thromboembolism after COVID-19 vaccination and SARS-CoV-2 positive testing: self-controlled case series study and Maintenance or discontinuation of antidepressants in primary care.

“...This [highly-commended] paper [Risk of thrombocytopenia and thromboembolism after COVID-19 vaccination and SARS-CoV-2 positive testing: self-controlled case series study] has a really important public health message that can be used as evidence by primary care clinicians in conversations with people who are vaccine-hesitant.”

The winner of category 2 was another trial: Non-speculum sampling approaches for cervical screening in older women: randomised controlled trial.

A GP needs to feel comfortable discussing the risk of relapse of depression with a patient when considering reducing and withdrawing an antidepressant. This study provides evidence to inform that discussion.

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WINNER OF CATEGORY 3: MEDICAL EDUCATION WITH RELEVANCE TO PRIMARY CARE
The winner of category 3 was the paper: Maintenance or discontinuation of antidepressants in primary care.

GP trainees may have little contact with women attending for cervical smears, which are largely done by practice nurses, but they may speak to women opportunistically and in postnatal checks, so being aware of the choices available is key to offering advice to women.

“...This [highly-commended] paper [Risk of thrombocytopenia and thromboembolism after COVID-19 vaccination and SARS-CoV-2 positive testing: self-controlled case series study] has a really important public health message that can be used as evidence by primary care clinicians in conversations with people who are vaccine-hesitant.”

The authors conclude that unless pneumonia is suspected, clinicians should not prescribe antibiotics for most children presenting with chest infections. The authors emphasise the need for safety-netting advice — encouraging parents to monitor their child and provide advice about when to consult again.”

The winner of category 3 was the paper:
"The RCA [Recorded Consultation Assessment] is not without its criticism, but this paper demonstrates that it was a pragmatic replacement for the CSA [Clinical Skills Assessment] at the height of the pandemic. The introduction of the RCA has arguably had the largest impact on GP trainees over the last 2 years."

Candidate perceptions of the UK Recorded Consultation Assessment: cross-sectional data linkage study: This study provided early evidence that the Recorded Consultation Assessment (RCA) was a feasible alternative to the Clinical Skills Assessment (CSA) during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also shows areas for improvement. This paper reflects the earliest modifications of the exam, and changes have certainly been made since then to reflect day-to-day practice. The RCA is not without its criticism, but this paper demonstrates that it was a pragmatic replacement for the CSA at the height of the pandemic. The introduction of the RCA has arguably had the largest impact on GP trainees over the last 2 years. Further work is required to establish whether there are any issues surrounding differential attainment, particularly for less-than-full-time (LTFT) ethnic minorities or international medical graduates. The RCA will need to evolve to reflect the rapidly changing face of delivering primary care and consider whether its current model reflects the ability of trainees to undertake the role of a qualified GP.

IT IS VITAL THAT GP TRAINEES ENGAGE WITH RESEARCH

For many trainees, keeping up with research in primary care may fall last on a list of priorities that is overwhelmingly populated by mandatory portfolio entries or exams. However, these winning and commended papers contain relevant learning for GP trainees of all stages as they cover the breadth of the curriculum for both competencies and clinical topics.

It is vital to encourage GP trainees to engage with research, not least for clinical updates, but also to support their development in areas such as managing risk, shared decision making, and dealing with uncertainty. Trainees can also use the emerging evidence from trials such as ARTIC PC1 to empower patients to make decisions within primary care consultations. Equally, we should highlight research that, on face value, may not look as relevant. While trainees may not be directly involved in cervical smears, for example, they should opportunistically be participating in health promotion and demonstrating this within their portfolio.

We hope that you will (re-)read the winning papers and reflect on how research carried out in general practice informs our clinical decision making and supports us to deliver evidence-based care to our patients.

We must encourage GP trainees to acquire and use current evidence, and that they can demonstrate this in their MRCPG.

We can all support trainees by signposting them to WiseGP, an initiative supported by the RCGP, the Society for Academic Primary Care, and the National Institute for Health and Care Research School for Primary Care Research. Winners of the RPY award are encouraged to submit GEMS [General practice Evidence for Modern day practice] to the WiseGP website, and you will find previous winners’ papers at https://www.wisegp.co.uk/gem-library.

The call for RPY 2022 will be out in the summer — please do submit a paper you feel has impacted on your clinical practice.

Carolyn Chew-Graham,
Professor of General Practice Research, School of Medicine, Keele University, Keele; Chair, RCGP Research Paper of the Year.

Helen Leach,
Academic Clinical Fellow, Unit of Academic Primary Care, Warwick University, Coventry.

Email: helen.leach@warwick.ac.uk

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