

Report from the National Physiotherapy Research Network (NPRN)

The origins of NPRN

NPRN emerged from an initiative of the CSP to find a 'research champion'. This was to be someone who could provide additional momentum and expertise to support the research capacity building process in physiotherapy. Following discussion among senior researchers, it was recognised that the task was too great for one individual to accomplish. An alternative proposal was put forward to form a national self-help network of researchers who could link closely with clinicians, managers, students, consultants and other AHPs to support research. This was approved and funded by the CSP. The NPRN is hosted by the CRC, and held its official launch in June 2005.

NPRN and its regional hub structure

In the Spring of 2005, a call was put out for applications from senior researchers interested in becoming facilitators of regional research hubs, designed to respond to local research support needs. A total of 20 hubs were created, and each is led entirely on a voluntary basis by a senior researcher located (or part-located) in a university. In addition to the regional hubs, a further hub was created comprising nine members who represent either the interests of Clinical Interest and Occupational Groups (CI/OGs) as a whole, or specific Clinical and Occupational Groups and the Physiotherapy Research Society. The regional and CIG hub facilitators and core executive members meet as a group three times per year to share experiences and ideas, to plan ways of improving the quality and accessibility of research support and to report on the activities they have undertaken.

Management of NPRN

A core executive group was formed to oversee NPRN, consisting of Professor Ann Moore (chair), Professor Di Newham (King's College, London), Professor Julius Sim (Keele), Professor Maria Stokes (Southampton), Dr Jill Higgins (CSP Director of Learning and Development), Dr Gabrielle Rankin (CSP Research Adviser), Dr Liz White and Dr Wendy Magee (Research Forum for the Allied Health Professions - RFAHP) and Dr Philippa Lyon, the full-time Research Officer, who took up post in August 2005. During the last year, Dr Magee stepped down and Professor Jackie Campbell, chair of the RFAHP joined the group. The core executive is responsible for ensuring that the aims and actions detailed in the NPRN Strategic Plan 2005-2010 are met. This group also oversees the growth and development of the network and its evaluation.

Vision and strategic aims

In June 2005, NPRN held a combined launch and strategic planning event and subsequently produced its Strategic Plan for the period 2005-2010. At the forefront of this plan is a vision that by the end of the five year contract, the NPRN will 'have established a collaborative national network of locally-responsive hubs, so as to promote increased research awareness and capacity, and facilitate high-quality research activity that will be relevant to the needs of practitioners and respond to health care needs.'

Highlights of NPRN activities during 2006-7

National

Support for CIG officers and members was developed further during the last year through the NPRN programme of workshops. The first of these, a very well-received workshop for newsletter and journal editors, resulted in an electronic support network being established.

This network, for the ongoing advice and peer support of those in editorial roles, sits within the CSP's interactive website, iCSP. A second NPRN workshop on beginning to search for research funding was also attended by many CIOG members, and resulted in equally positive feedback.

NPRN has gathered information as an electronic quick reference guide to key members' areas of research expertise. This was developed and placed on the web pages on the CSP web site, as a resource complementary to the new CSP researchers' database. Information on finding and accessing research funding has also been added to the site

Efforts have continued to be made in conjunction with the CSP to lobby for funding to support research in physiotherapy and the AHPs. NPRN has also continued to develop its links with other research support agencies over the last year, both at national and regional level. This includes the important relationship with the Research Forum for Allied Health Professions (RFAHP), represented in formal terms now by its chair, Professor Jackie Campbell, who has taken up a vacancy on the NPRN Core Executive. Many productive links with NHS RDSU and other agencies have been forged at regional level, as can be seen in the section on regional hub activities.

Regional

Over the last year, there have been five new individuals taking up the role of hub facilitator: these changes have taken place in Aberdeen, East Anglia, Keele, North East England and the West of Scotland. There has also been a new CIOG representative member.

The **Aberdeen** hub, facilitated by Dr Alasdair MacSween, held a combined launch event and best practice day. This attracted excellent attendance from across the East of Scotland and included a video conference facility for the Shetland and Orkney Islands.

The **Cumbria and Lancashire** hub, facilitated by Professor James Selfe, continued to respond to specific individual queries. Enquiry topics ranged from how to access journal clubs and gain support for specific research projects, to how to find a publisher willing to discuss a book idea. Strong links have been established between the Cumbria and Lancashire hub and Health Research and Development NoW, involving the regular exchange of information. Health Research and Development NoW has helped advertise hub study days and promote hub activities to the north of the region. During this reporting period, the hub also ran a study day on paediatrics, in collaboration with the North West Physiotherapy Research Forum.

The **Dublin** hub became formally established during this reporting year, with Dr Emma Stokes as facilitator. Two of the higher education institutions in the Dublin area that offer physiotherapy programmes are involved in the hub.

A number of specific research-related enquiries were received by the **Keele** hub. In some cases one-to-one meetings with the facilitator were held to discuss and respond to these queries in detail; in other cases enquirers were put in touch with other hub members for specialist advice. A multidisciplinary neurology research facilitation group called eNeRGy continued to meet as part of the Keele hub: eNeRGy members include senior physiotherapists (clinical specialists), senior occupational therapists (clinical specialists), a clinical psychologist, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, a physiotherapy lecturer practitioner, and a consultant nurse. Dr Bailey, together with another colleague in the hub, offered training to this group, and group members provide each other with peer support

through activities such as critical appraisal. During the year the hub also created links with two of the University of Keele's Research Institutes (RIs): the Life Course Studies RI and the Primary Care and Health Sciences Research Centre. Rehabilitation-related research is strong in both institutes. The Keele hub also continued to work with the musculoskeletal CAT group run by a local Consultant Physiotherapist.

The first year of the **East Anglia** hub has been concentrated on developing systematic records of interested local members. A steady increase in the number of enquires has indicated that the network is becoming more embedded within local physiotherapy culture. Enquiries to the hub facilitator have led to guidance on taking MSc modules, finding appropriate evidence for practice, developing research ideas for Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) bids and applications for PhD funding. Currently, the research strengths of the hub members are mainly in the areas of musculoskeletal practice. The hub is planning, in conjunction with a department in the University of East Anglia, to provide a series of facilitated sessions in the workplace. These sessions will be designed to help develop an evidence based practice culture that can generate relevant research questions.

The **Hertfordshire** hub, facilitated by Dr Mindy Cairns, had a very successful launch event in September 2006. This event reflected the interdisciplinary aspirations of the NPRN: a wide range of disciplines were involved, including dieticians, radiographers, scientists and colleagues in public health, and many different job roles were represented, from junior clinicians to managers. Interest in the hub has been sustained since then, and a series of evening sessions, 'Getting Research into Practice', to be run on clinical sites, is planned.

The **Leeds** hub, facilitated by Charikleia Sinani, experienced a higher volume of enquiries than the previous year. Enquiry topics ranged from queries about PhD supervision and funding and opportunities to take part in research projects and collaborations, to queries about specific techniques, such as systematic review. Positive feedback was received on the support offered. The hub continued to run research meetings and workshops. Links were developed with all universities in Yorkshire, most NHS trusts in Yorkshire, and with the Yorkshire Allied Health Professions Forum and the Leeds University motor impairment group in particular.

In **Limerick**, Dr Susan Coote, the hub facilitator, carried out a survey of research needs and interests in the region. The level of response to the survey was very good, and the results revealed that the main needs were for education and mentoring. A web page was set up to provide information and updates about hub activities.

The **London** hub, run by a group of five facilitators based in different universities, has seen significant growth over the last year. The combined hub launch event and low back pain seminar in December 2006 attracted an audience of over 250 physiotherapists and AHPs, most of whom opted to remain connected with the hub and now receive regular mailings from the hub facilitators. Hub facilitators spoke to a large audience of physiotherapists in the Royal London NHS Trust at the request of senior clinicians working to establish a research support group there. The hub will continue to advise and support this group as required. In addition to this, the facilitators have supported a journal club at the Royal Marsden Hospital and circulated information on research funding opportunities and workshops on research methods run at Hammersmith Hospital. The hub facilitators also supported enquirers on issues such as how to write a conference poster and how to make the decision whether or not to apply for a PhD.

The **Midlands** hub, facilitated by Dr Chris McCarthy, has just established sponsorship with a local company, and is planning to hold a launch in October. The hub received a steady stream of enquiries and had made links with a number of research groups, including ARMA.

The **North East England** hub had initially been facilitated by Liz Holey. This role was transferred to Dr Denis Martin during the course of the year. The hub supported laboratory-based work in particular, due to the facilities available, and developed a productive link with the Regional Development Agency in the North East.

The **Sheffield** hub continued to be facilitated by Dr Sue Mawson, together a steering group which met three times over the course of the last year. These meetings were used to disseminate NPRN news, discuss local research issues, circulate funding information and plan the hub events programme. A further two training events were run. The first of these was a seminar on the Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) funding programme, held in conjunction with the Trent Research and Development Support Unit (TRDSU): the purpose was to inform colleagues about the RfPB funding stream and to begin working up proposals for submission. The second event was a small conference funded by the TRDSU and the drug company Allergan Ltd., to disseminate information on current research activity taking place within the Sheffield hub region. Previously the hub conducted a survey of research skills and training needs amongst clinical supervisors, and has now additionally scoped the research capacity of the physiotherapy staff in Southampton University Hospital NHS Trust. This survey highlighted that nearly one third of clinical staff had current or recent work they would like to publish. The main threats to successful publication were perceived to be time, lack of funding and staffing shortages. A database of physiotherapists was set up, enabling the hub to circulate information about research training, funding opportunities or research open meetings.

Over the last year, the **Southampton** hub facilitators had 55 appointments with 29 clinicians about research development issues. In addition, there were eight meetings with four clinicians about career development and progression and 12 teaching sessions were delivered to Physiotherapy Departments. Compared with the previous 12 months the hub has supported fewer clinicians, but provided more substantial support. Enquires were also received from clinicians outside the hub catchment area. For example, a private physiotherapist from Gloucester is now developing research proposals with the SoHPRS and Southampton General Hospital. A private physiotherapist from Canada who began discussions with the hub about collaborative research has decided to register as a part-time PhD student at Southampton.

In the **South East England** hub the three facilitators, Dr Angela Glynn, Dr Raija Kuisma and Dr Philippa Lyon, built up a substantial list of contacts and ran a number of events. Activities included: a meeting to help promote the hub in the north of the region; and a workshop on developing ideas into research questions. A strong neuro-musculoskeletal sub-grouping held regular meetings with speakers, and these attracted a very good level of attendance. The hub also developed a dedicated network to support communication and information exchange, as part of the CSP's interactive website, iCSP.

The hub in the **South West of England**, jointly facilitated by Dr Fiona Cramp and Dr Shea Palmer, built up a substantial research interests database over the course of the year. A sub-grouping of the hub continued to develop in the peninsula, and one PhD registration at the University of the West of England occurred as a direct result of the hub's support. The hub

was particularly successful in helping those researching in cognate areas to network with each other.

The **Wales** hub, facilitated by Dr Robert Van Deursen and Dr Valerie Sparkes, continued with the Wales hub roadshow, promoting the support offered by the hub throughout the principality.

The **West of Scotland** hub, facilitated by Dr Lorna Paul, mainly operates by providing research seminars and events, which are free of charge and to which all members are invited. A small Planning and Implementation Group (PIG) with representatives from the NHS, HEIs and the private sector organised these events. In April 2007 the hub was invited to give a presentation as part of the practice development day for physiotherapists working in NHS primary care within the Greater Glasgow and Clyde area. Over the last year, the hub hosted two key seminars. One of these, 'Juggling research and clinical practice', was held in August 2006. This enabled clinicians to hear from various practitioners with experience of research, and to gain practical advice about how a clinical post can be combined with research. A series of short presentations covered topics such as: carrying out small scale studies in a clinical setting, applying for funding, managing time and dissemination of findings.

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