

What is research?

Research is a topic that many find intimidating. When people think of research they often tend to think of people in white coats conducting experiments or drug trials. But most health research is not like this. This issue of **Research Bites** will look at the concept of research, as well as the related concepts of evaluation and quality improvement, activities which many health workers are familiar with through their current work.

Research

A broad definition of research is any activity which is undertaken to increase knowledge. In the health field research can be defined as *the systematic investigation of a problem, issue or question which increases knowledge and understanding of health and the provision of care.*

Evaluation

Many people who work in the health area are involved in the implementation of projects which aim to improve health or health services delivery. Evaluation is an integral part of this implementation. It can be defined as *the process of judging the*

Welcome to a regular new feature about research basics from PHReNet South!

PHReNet stands for the Primary Health Care Research Network in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven, an initiative to build research capacity in general practice and primary health care. We will be producing a series of brief, simple summaries about research that you can save and compile into a resource folder. Look out for an issue every two months.

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value of an intervention by systematically gathering information to make more informed decisions.

Quality improvement

Activities to improve the quality of health care through formal processes of quality improvement (QI) are also common in the health field. QI provides a framework for monitoring and improving performance by *systematically reviewing care provided or outcomes achieved against explicit criteria.*

Research or evaluation or QI?

These definitions indicate that research, evaluation and QI are similar processes which focus on the collection on valid and reliable information to answer questions in a systematic way. However the questions that they answer each

have a different focus:

- *research questions* aim to discover new knowledge;
- *evaluation questions* aim to judge the worth of an intervention;
- *QI questions* aim to examine how well something is done and improve performance.

How can research be used?

The results of research, as well as evaluation and QI can be used in a number of ways, including:

- adding to the knowledge base;
- maintaining or changing a program or service;
- arguing for extra funds or resources to address particular issues or needs;
- advocating for the re-allocation of resources;
- contributing to policy development.

For example...

A new program is being implemented in the Area Health Service as part of the chronic disease initiatives. It involves conducting group exercise and education sessions for people who have recently been discharged from hospital with CVD and sharing information with local GPs about the management and progress of their patients.

- *If you are interested in improving the quality of information flows between the hospital and GPs you could ask: **what proportion of discharge summaries reach GPs within the recommended interval of 2 days?***
- *If you are evaluating the effectiveness of the community education sessions you could ask: **do the education sessions decrease readmission rates for people who receive them compared to those who do not?***
- *If you are researching management of chronic disease you could ask: **what is the best way to educate patients about secondary prevention of CVD?***



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Coming up in the next issue: Evaluation