

Book reviews

Saks, M., Williams, M. and Hancock, B. editors. 2000: *Developing research in primary care*. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press. 154 pp. £15.99. ISBN 1 85775 397 6.

This is a practical book, full of helpful information for people who want to embark on research in primary care. It is well written and laid out, with a glossary of research terminology. A summary of learning goals is provided in each chapter, together with exercises and answers for readers to consolidate their learning. Some chapters are slanted more to the needs of general practitioners, and some more towards those of nurses, but overall the authors' multidisciplinary background has resulted in a text of relevance for everyone in primary care. The focus of the book is the novice researcher, but there is much in it that will be of interest to those who have already undertaken some research. The book provides the reader with a clear understanding of what is involved in research, together with some of the key knowledge that is necessary to undertake studies. However, it is not a book for the novice researcher to reach for two weeks before a submission deadline for their first grant application – but then a book cannot be expected to help much in such circumstances!

There are chapters on developing research protocols and applying for research grants, undertaking literature reviews, ethical considerations in research, health needs assessment, presenting and disseminating results and implementing research findings. The chapter on ethical considerations is particularly good, explaining not just the ethical principles involved in research, but also why the seemingly tedious, bureaucratic hurdle of ethical committee submission is so important for the research process. The chapters on applying for funding and disseminating research findings discuss the likely impact on the novice researcher of having their first grant application or paper turned down, and normalize this distressing but virtually inevitable event.

The chapter on health needs assessment is full of useful information, but the inclusion of such a chapter is interesting and not fully explained by the

editor. The alternative might have been to include chapters giving more detailed information about specific research methodologies (surveys, trials and qualitative research methods), or alternatively more information about research governance or the implications of the Data Protection Act. These are all of importance for researchers who want to undertake significant research projects. Instead, readers are referred to other texts for this information. Perhaps health needs assessment is the most common type of research carried out by novice researchers in primary care.

There is some overlap between the chapters on reviewing the literature and those on implementing evidence, with Medline searches being covered in both chapters. More might have been mentioned in one of these chapters about existing databases of systematic reviews. Cochrane Reviews are mentioned, but not those of the Health Technology Assessment Programme or the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at York. The chapter on writing research reports and dissertations is good, with many helpful tips for those embarking on this daunting task for the first time. The chapter on implementing research findings is also well written, but sits a bit oddly in this book. The implementation of research requires a different set of knowledge and skills to research, and is not really the job of the researchers. The list of journals which are likely to publish research on primary care does not include *Primary Health Care Research and Development*, but then it also excludes the *British Medical Journal* and the *British Journal of General Practice*!

Overall this new book is a valuable contribution to the literature and will be a great help to those working in primary care who want to undertake research.

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Birch, K., Field, S. and Scrivens, E. 2000: *Quality in general practice*. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press. 186 pp. £19.95. ISBN 1 85775 364 X.

This book is aimed at anyone involved in primary care development, but particularly those working to improve individual and organizational quality in general practice. It is divided into two sections. Section One, which consists of three chapters, sets out the recent policy background to quality in primary care. It then explores the conceptual and operational elements of quality care, and examines a range of approaches to assessing practitioner and organizational performance in general practice.

Section Two draws on a recent national survey of health authorities in England and Wales undertaken by the authors, providing practical examples of quality and performance management programmes currently in use in primary care. More specifically, Chapter 4 explores poor performance among GPs and the systems that have been developed locally and nationally to deal with this difficult issue. Chapter 5 reviews a large number of schemes that have been developed to assess and improve the quality of general practice-based care. Chapter 6 presents a model of clinical governance for primary care as a means of drawing together some of the diverse and complex strands of quality improvement highlighted in the book 'which may be used to locate quality or performance management initiatives within a wider framework'.

As the authors themselves acknowledge, the process of defining, assessing and improving quality in primary care is no easy task. Importantly, they note the disparate views on the nature of quality in primary care which exist between different professional groups, the public and managers, and they emphasize the fact that the organizational structures upon which any quality improvement programme needs to be based are highly complex and perpetually unstable. A book which attempts to unpick these complexities, both from an academic viewpoint and from a practice-based one, is therefore particularly welcome. It is also very timely, given the recent and ongoing development of primary care organizations across the UK, not to mention the current reviews of professional self-regulation that are taking place in virtually all

national regulatory bodies associated with health care provision.

In my view the book, rather than making sense of a very complicated subject, gets lost in a mass of descriptive data, bullet points and lengthy quotes. For example, it was frustrating, on the one hand, to have six pages of text reproducing the West Midlands' criteria for gaining GP trainee status (which could have been placed in an appendix), whilst on the other having very little exploration of the effectiveness of the majority of the initiatives mentioned. As a performance or primary care development manager I would be keen to know which of the myriad approaches to quality improvement mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5 were actually effective, even if this meant relying on the professional judgement of the authors. Even where initiatives have been subjected to formal evaluation (e.g., RCGP accreditation programmes), few details of what these evaluations found were provided – nor even, in this instance, a reference for readers to follow up elsewhere.

This is not to imply that the book contains no useful information. Quite the reverse is true. There were particularly informative sections on identifying and dealing with poor GP performance and on local practice accreditation schemes (e.g., Sheffield Health Authority's *Commitment to Quality* programme). Having read the book, I felt that I had a good overview of what approaches to quality improvement in primary care are available across the country, and it was very helpful to have health authorities named so that specific initiatives could be followed up locally. However, overall the book lacks a coherent framework within which the information provided could be logically assembled and critically examined. In addition, given the numerous references to the multiprofessional nature of both primary care and general practice, it would have been interesting to compare different professional groups' approaches to quality improvement. For example, the useful examination of poorly performing GPs in Chapter 4 could have been nicely complemented by an exploration of clinical supervision programmes currently being implemented in primary care nursing.

In summary, this book provides an extensive, even exhaustive descriptive account of approaches to quality improvements both for GPs as individ-

uals and for general practices as organizations. It would probably have benefited from a more cohesive structure, more detailed critical analysis and greater acknowledgement of the contribution of other professional disciplines (not to mention service users) to the ongoing development of quality in primary care.

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