Patient safety research: shaping the European agenda

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Introduction

Patient safety is an issue in all settings where healthcare is provided. Adverse events are determined by the systems of healthcare and the practice of individuals within these systems. Research is needed to measure the extent of the problems, identify causes, develop solutions using scientific evidence, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

The Ministries of Health of Luxembourg and the UK held conferences on patient safety in 2004. In 2006, the Faculty of Public Health of the UK Royal Colleges of Physicians was successful in a competitive call by the European Commission's Directorate of Research to hold a conference on patient safety research, and chose to hold it in Porto with the Ministry of Health during the Portuguese European Union (EU) presidency.

Preparation

The conference aimed to bring together international researchers and policymakers to debate research issues, policy and collective action. The Conference Advisory Committee included the organising partners and key advisers, while the Scientific Advisory Group was created through advice to reflect interests across Europe. The PubMed database of biomedical research provided a starting point to identify European-published research on patient safety and 13 leading researchers were invited to write position papers for the conference workshops.[1]

Attendance was free, but limited by invitation only, to ensure financial control. European researchers identified through the literature review were contacted, and the conference was advertised at the annual meetings of the European Public Health Association and the European Society for Quality in Health Care. Researchers were invited to submit an abstract electronically for the conference and to register interest on the website. This yielded 175 abstracts, of which 150 were accepted. Special efforts were made to identify participants from neighbouring European countries (for example the Balkan, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries) and from developing countries already active with the World Health Organization (WHO) World Alliance. The conference included participants from 62 countries.

Event

The conference opened with plenary speakers from the Portuguese Ministry of Health and the WHO World Alliance for Patient Safety. To encourage early engagement, participants joined in roundtable discussion in groups of eight to consider individual research presentations and general questions on research priorities. Finally, a conference facilitator led a discussion with participants using a roving microphone. This session allowed participants to meet and enabled a wide range of participants to express their views to the whole conference. During the second day there were themed workshops for researchers, with discussion of the prepared papers, and policy sessions for participants from ministries of health and civil society organisations. This was followed by presentations about research networks in Europe and beyond, with opportunities to create new networks on proposed themes. Discussion on the final morning included the perspective of patients in developing and supporting research, and the importance of individual ministries of health commissioning patient safety research.

Outcomes

Participants recommended that patient safety research should involve a wide range of stakeholders, and promote contributions from patients. Basic and applied research are needed to support policy and practice, and as part of broader health service research activities. EU member states should prioritise patient safety research within their health research programmes and countries should work together to share expertise and best practice, and form networks, where appropriate.

Following comments made during the workshop, the papers have been revised, edited and published.[2] The conference report and all other materials for the conference were transferred to the Faculty of Public Health website,[3] with links to the WHO World Alliance for Patient Safety.

Evaluation of the conference, with 20.5% of participants responding through an online questionnaire, was very positive. The discussion session conducted by the conference facilitator was very popular and was seen by one attendee as 'a unique opportunity

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for researchers, policymakers and clinicians to talk about patient safety from their particular viewpoint'.

Conclusion

European work on patient safety is now being taken forward in a collaboration (the European Network for Patient Safety[4]) led by the French Ministry of Health, and patient safety research has been prioritised in the health pillar of the European Commission's Seventh Framework Research Programme. The research challenges are to understand the causes of adverse events, to assess the effectiveness of interventions, and to ensure that health services across Europe benefit from the knowledge gained from research to reduce harm to patients.

References

1   Brookes M, McCarthy M. Patient safety research: defining European research themes. In: McCarthy M, Brookes M (eds), *Patient safety research: European research reviews*. London: UK Faculty of Public Health, 2008:1–11.

2   McCarthy M, Brookes M (eds). *Patient safety research: European research reviews*. London: UK Faculty of Public Health, 2008.

3   Patient safety: shaping the European agenda (conference report). www.fph.org.uk/patientsafetyresearch/default.asp

4   European Union Network for Patient Safety. www.eunetpas.eu