

# The role of *Australian Family Physician* in supporting general practice research – A personal perspective

Tania Winzenberg

The *Australian Family Physician* has held a special place in both my current academic life as a researcher and clinical life as a general practitioner (GP). *AFP* provided relevant, clear, educational resources that improved my clinical and professional skills and knowledge when I was a general practice registrar and early-career GP. *AFP* has also fulfilled a number of roles that have been of significant importance to me in my career as a general practice researcher. These include disseminating and translating research, and contributing to building capacity in general practice researchers. I know from discussions with other general practice researchers that the journal has influenced the research directions and career development of many Australian general practice researchers.

*AFP* provides an important avenue for original research to reach the grassroots GPs that the research aims to support. Choosing to which journal to send research is driven by a range of factors, including the topics that the journal publishes, the journal's stature and the ability of the journal to reach the correct target audience. When I think my work might be helpful for Australia's GPs, *AFP* becomes one of the top places in which I strive to publish. With its print circulation of around 34,000,

95% of whom are GPs, and its free online access for primary healthcare practitioners anywhere in the world, its ability to connect GPs and researchers is unsurpassed in the Australian setting.

To support evidence-based practice, high-quality general practice research must be disseminated in a format that is digestible for practising GPs. One problem in connecting GPs with research data is that, often, the format and information required by research journals is incompatible with the need for GPs to be able to quickly ascertain what is important about the research and how it might be useful in their practice. Good examples of this are Cochrane systematic reviews. These reviews provide robust evidence around the effectiveness of interventions, but in their full form are usually long, detailed and not always written in a way that makes their application to clinical practice clear. *AFP* provides a vehicle for disseminating research evidence in a format more relevant to GPs. I have taken advantage of this to write case-based educational materials based around Cochrane reviews, for example, on the use of colchicine for acute gout.<sup>1</sup> Similar GP-friendly dissemination approaches are regularly seen in reviews that *AFP* commissions on the management of conditions or use of investigations.

*AFP* helps to connect general practice researchers. Research is a costly enterprise in terms of time, money and the efforts of researchers and GPs who aid our research. Research is also a 'team sport'. In the complex general practice environment, diverse research skills are needed to design and implement studies. It is therefore critical that researchers know of each other's work to prevent waste from unnecessary duplication and facilitate building the best teams to produce high-quality research. For major studies, a large team of researchers and supportive GPs is needed. For example, recruitment of 16,703 Australians for the ASPREE study of low-dose aspirin in older people<sup>2</sup> was possible only because a substantial number of Australian GPs and general practices participated ([www.aspree.org/aus/about-us/the-aspree-study](http://www.aspree.org/aus/about-us/the-aspree-study)).

Another important role of *AFP* is providing opportunities for GPs to develop research skills and even build a research career. The journal provides substantial support to novice and early-career researchers. For example, of 80 GPs who were awarded an Australian PhD from 2005 to 2015, 58 (73%) had published in *AFP*, often multiple times, with a total of 296 *AFP* papers from these researchers. This represents over half of their publication output in Australian general journals (Professor

Gerard Gill, personal communication).

The impact of having positive contact with a journal as a novice researcher cannot be overestimated. My first submission to *AFP* derived from an assignment for a coursework Masters in clinical epidemiology. This required comprehensive literature reviews assessing the usefulness of numerous biochemical tests in general practice. Given my inexperience, I submitted this as a tome that, in hindsight, was highly unlikely to be attractive to any editor or reader. Luckily, instead of a frank rejection, I received encouraging peer review and editorial advice on how to revise the paper to make it useful and readable. This resulted in my first peer-reviewed journal publication<sup>3</sup> and, just as importantly, motivated me to further develop my research skills and pursue that career.

*AFP* has also striven in other ways to support local researchers. Publishing in internationally recognised journals is necessary for researchers to prove the importance of their work to funding bodies and universities. Aware of this, the *AFP* team sought, and in 2008 achieved, such a marker of international recognition: a journal 'impact factor' rating, which measures how often articles in a journal are cited by other papers. More recently, the annual 'Best general practice research paper in the *AFP* journal' award was instigated, to acknowledge the efforts of the research community, which also

allows its recipients to demonstrate that their work is exceptional.

Finally, *AFP* supports the collegiality of general practice. It is one forum by which the The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners' (RACGP's) membership can gain an awareness of clinical, educational and research activity in Australian general practice. It provides a collegial platform where clinical and academic GPs can share in the successes of the general practice research community.

In summary, *AFP* is to be congratulated on its 60 years of publishing original research, assisting the translation of research into practice and contributing to building the capacity of GPs to undertake research that benefits the profession.

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