

Practice-based Research Networks and Public Health Agencies: Can They Generate Evidence and Improve Practice?

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RATIONALE: Practice-based research networks (PBRNs) have been used successfully in clinical research fields to increase the production and translation of research that identifies pathways for improving the quality and safety of medical care, particularly in primary care settings. PBRNs allow community-based providers to collaborate with researchers in designing, implementing, evaluating, and diffusing solutions to real-world problems in clinical practice. The success of PBRNs within the medical community suggests that they also may be effective in accelerating the production and translation of evidence within the field of public health practice. **METHODS:** To assess feasibility and design options for public health PBRNs, we conducted qualitative interviews with the leaders of 8 established clinical PBRNs in the U.S. and with administrators of both state and local public health officials. We also conducted content analysis of applications submitted by public health agencies who applied to the first round of a national funding initiative to support the development of PBRNs. **RESULTS:** A high degree of enthusiasm exists among both clinical and public health leaders regarding the feasibility and potential value of developing public health PBRNs. Some public health agencies already have experience in research with primary care PBRNs. A number of different PBRN design alternatives were proposed, including single-state, regional, and national network structures as well as networks organized around common practice features such as rural or tribal public health practice. Respondents proposed that PBRNs focus on an array of applied, translational research projects including practice variation studies, policy evaluations and natural experiments, and quality improvement studies conducted in both local and state agency settings. **CONCLUSIONS:** PBRNs hold considerable promise for stimulating applied public health studies and diffusing their findings rapidly into practice.

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this session, participants will be able to: (1) identify key attributes of practice-based research networks; (2) assess models of adapting PBRNs to public health practice environments; and (3) design and evaluate applied research projects to be conducted through public health PBRNs.