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New international study sheds light on what makes mental health research more likely to benefit patients

Report suggests that biomedical research funders who want to make a difference to patients within 20 years should focus on clinical research and support researchers who work across boundaries and are motivated by patient need

28th October 2013 – To make an impact on patient care within a 20-year timeframe, biomedical research funders and policymakers should focus resources on clinical rather than basic research, and support individuals who work across disciplinary boundaries or across stages of the “bench-to-bedside” translation pathway, according to a new report released today by RAND Europe.

“The Mental Health Retrosight report [available free [online](#)] provides our findings from the field of schizophrenia research, and shows how research projects that successfully translated into patient benefit share certain characteristics,” said Steven Wooding, lead author and project leader at RAND Europe in Cambridge, UK. “These attributes could be selected for, promoted or nurtured to increase the impact of future research.”

The three-year international project was funded by the International Alliance of Mental Health Research Funders to examine mental health and neuroscience research in Canada, the USA and the UK, with a focus on schizophrenia. Two methods were combined to understand how research conducted 20 years ago is related to patient benefits and wider impacts today. Researchers traced forward from research projects that achieved a high profile 20 years ago to follow their outputs today, and tracked backward from today’s advances in treatment and care, to discover their research foundations.

“We traced and interviewed scientists, clinicians and patients and combined this with literature reviews, to build detailed narratives of the process and progress of different strands of research,” said Alexandra Pollitt, a report co-author and a senior analyst at RAND Europe. From these narratives and perspectives, the team distilled the attributes (characteristics of the research, researchers and research context) that previously led to successful translation from bench to bedside.

PRESS RELEASE

The study's headline findings are:

1. The case studies and perspectives support the view that mental health research over the past 20 years has led to a diverse and beneficial range of academic, health, social and economic impacts.
2. Over a 20-year time period, clinical research has had a larger impact on patient care than basic research.
3. Those involved in mental health research who work across boundaries are associated with wider health and social benefits.
4. Committed individuals, motivated by patient need, who effectively champion research agendas and/or translation into clinical practice, are key in driving the development and implementation of interventions.

The authors use their findings, alongside previous work in the field of research impact, to generate “provocations” for policymakers, funders and researchers themselves:

- Funders that aim to make a difference for patients within 20 years should focus on clinical research.
- It is best to support individuals who work across boundaries – both disciplinary boundaries and stages of the translation pathway – possibly by providing soft “expenses” type accounts and facilitating networking activities.
- Funders should identify and support researchers who are motivated by patient need.
- Opportunities for networking across disciplinary and translational boundaries should be developed.

“By providing important insights into how to make the most efficient and effective use of scarce research resources, this study makes a significant contribution to the ‘science of science’ field,” said Jonathan Grant, co-author and principal research fellow at RAND Europe.

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[RAND Europe](#) is an independent not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

Mental Health Retrosight was the first project under the [International Alliance of Mental Health Research Funders](#), an initiative by The Graham Boeckh Foundation, in collaboration with RAND Europe, that aims to improve the translation of research into faster cures and better treatments. The project was funded by the Graham Boeckh Foundation, Alberta Innovates Health Solutions, and the Canadian

PRESS RELEASE

Institutes of Health Research in Canada; the National Institute for Health Research in England; and the National Institute of Mental Health in the USA.

Notes for Editors:

Project background: This study borrowed and developed methods from the authors' previous work in the fields of arthritis research and cardiovascular disease research. The impacts were categorized according to the Payback Framework into five types: Knowledge production, Research targeting and capacity building (together comprising 'academic impacts'), Informing policy and product development, Health and health sector benefits and Broader social and economic benefits (these three comprising 'wider societal impacts').

Research methods: Two approaches from the toolbox of the 'science of science' were combined to examine how research conducted 20 years ago is related to patient benefits and wider impacts today.

Forward-tracing case studies began with 18 different high-profile research projects of 20 years ago, and traced the paths of their outputs forwards into the wide range of impacts experienced today, including academic, health and wider social and economic benefits. The tracing combined interviews with the original researchers and clinicians with bibliometrics and desk research, in an iterative process to develop a nuanced narrative and add depth and detail.

Backward-tracing perspectives began with six different current interventions or treatment advances. Using interviews with experts in the field, combined with desk research, we attempted to build a textured narrative that traced backwards (sometimes further than 20 years) to identify the research antecedents of each advance.

Further information: Mental Health Retrosight on the RAND website: policy and methods reports, video, research brief and related documents are available for download at www.randeurope.org/mhr