

Thomas Rosemann, Department of General Practice and Health Services Research, University of Zurich, Switzerland

Wonca Europe and its input on the Family Medicine research in Zurich



Switzerland is one of the richest countries in the world and has one of the best health care systems worldwide, but also one of the most expensive ones. Switzerland is also the home of important pharmaceutical companies, such as Roche or Novartis to mention just the biggest ones. Furthermore, the universities rank among the best universities in the world and are characterised by excellent research. In Zurich,

for example, the local health ministry has just decided to support research in the field of highly specialised medicine with an investment of 100 million Swiss francs over the next few years to expand the leading position of research in an international context. In contrast, the amount available for research in Primary Care, distributed by the RRMA¹, is limited to 200 000 Swiss francs per year for the whole country.

However, Switzerland is also faced with increasing health care costs and Primary Care has decreasing appeal, especially among young physicians. Many reforms have been undertaken, such as a revision of the reimbursement of lab testing which led to a significant decrease in the income for GPs. The disposal of medications which is allowed for GPs in many cantons is also under critical consideration and would lead to another decrease in the income for GPs.

Unfortunately, all these interventions and reforms in the health care system are politically motivated and lack any evidence. This is due to the fact that valid data about the health care system are not available, including studies assessing the role of the GP. Switzerland has previously focused – and still does so – on clinical research more than any other country. However, the awareness that health service research is needed to enable evidence-based decisions for all stakeholders, on how care should be provided, does not exist. The focus is still on *what* (new diagnostics and therapies for example) should be provided and underestimates the potential that lies in *how* the care is provided. OECD data, as well as other research data, have provided quite strong evidence that a better Primary Care orientation of a health care system is associated with lower costs and most probably with better care and higher quality of life for its patients. Unfortunately, Switzerland has never participated in these data collections and, consequently, politicians and other stakeholders are completely unaware of these facts. Of course, the extent to which political decisions are influenced by medical evidence may vary, but with no evidence, arbitrariness will be the alternative.

However, not only politicians underestimate the importance of health service research: GPs in Switzerland complain about the fading importance of their specialty and feel ignored and misunderstood by politicians. International comparisons substantiate the hypothesis that the role of a profession, especially Primary Care, shows a direct correlation to the amount of research that is available in its field. A country which, due to its size, is often compared with Switzerland is The Netherlands. Primary Care has a long tradition of research in this country and has produced a huge amount of studies, emphasizing the importance of the GP. These data were most likely the reason that the gate keeper role of the GP in the Netherlands could be retained when the health care system was fundamentally reformed in 2004.

Research also has an excellent potential to increase the appeal of Primary Care among young physicians. A specialty which has its own research profile, addressing highly relevant issues of daily care, attracts students as well as young physicians who are interested in medical care rather than in basic research. To combine practical work as a GP and research activity is a new and promising perspective, which the newly founded departments for Primary Care at the Swiss universities offer.

Research cannot solve all problems that Primary Care is faced with. However, research is essential to define and describe the future role of the GP in the health care system. This role will be redefined in Switzerland, as in many other countries. The question is whether GPs themselves will create that new role definition or if the politicians will do that instead.

The newly established departments for Primary Care, such as the one in Zurich which was founded in spring 2008 and has a strong focus on health services research, represents an important step in the development of an autonomous research culture. However, without solid financial support, based on the awareness for the need of this research, they are at risk of deteriorating. Equally as important as financial support is the willingness of GPs to participate in these research projects. Therefore, I hope that the studies, presented at the Wonca meeting will inspire and motivate all colleagues, and especially the Swiss colleagues, to play a more active role in research.

Correspondence:

Prof. Thomas Rosemann
Department of General Practice and Health Services Research
University of Zurich
Sonneggstr. 6
CH-8091 Zürich
www.hausarztmedizin.uzh.ch
thomas.rosemann@usz.ch

¹ RRMA (Recherches et réalisations en médecine appliquée) is a department of the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences and responsible for promotion and financial support of research in primary care.