The National Dental Practice-Based Research Network is a consortium of participating practices and dental organizations committed to advancing knowledge of dental practice and ways to improve it. It is “practical science” done about, in, and for the benefit of “real-world” everyday clinical practice. The major source of funding for the nation’s network is the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), part of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). Dental professionals and researchers are encouraged to enroll in the network, engage in the development of studies, participate in data collection and other network opportunities, and utilize the results of network studies in practice with the collective goal of improving the nation’s oral health by improving the knowledge base for clinical decision-making and moving the latest evidence into routine care. Int J Evid Based Pract Dent Hygienist 2015;1:17–18 doi: 10.11607/ebh.001503

Keywords: dental practice, research, network, oral health

In the last decade, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has made a major investment in an innovative approach to oral health research. In 2005, NIH’s National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) announced three awards totaling nearly $70 million. These grants established three separate regional dental practice-based research networks (PBRNs). Between 2005 and 2012, over 1,700 practitioners were enrolled in these networks. Many dentists and dental hygienists seeing patients in regular clinical practice opted to participate in the development of PBRN studies and the collection of data.

In 2012, a 7-year second funding cycle was announced. Again, a nearly $68 million cooperative agreement with NIDCR advanced the work of the three previous networks and established a single National Dental Practice-Based Research Network. The opportunity for enrollment and study participation is now expanded to all US dental professionals. International practitioners may enroll to receive information. To date, more than 6,020 individuals have joined and the future of the nation’s network is bright. More than 1,580 of the network’s current members are dental hygienists. This represents a significant shift from the prior funding cycle and will be important as the network translates findings into practice to improve the oral health of the nation. A recently launched study on the management of dentin hypersensitivity promises results that will directly impact dental hygiene practice. Another study exploring the identification and management of suspicious occlusal lesions may impact the way dentists assess and diagnose caries, but it may also be meaningful to hygienists facilitating the medical management of such lesions when they appear limited to the enamel. An upcoming pilot study evaluating the feasibility of screening for oral human papilloma virus (HPV) in dental settings has been very important to dental hygienists as they identify how to evaluate and best manage patients at risk for HPV-related oropharyngeal cancer. Learn more about what has been completed and what is upcoming at: NationalDentalPBRN.org/Studies.php.
So, what’s in it for me?

It depends on your role in the profession, but in many cases, practice-based research represents a specific research paradigm that the profession has been waiting for—research that has the potential to immediately impact everyday clinical practice for the benefit of all. As a reader of an evidence-based practice journal, you likely do not need convincing of this. But to underscore the importance of this contribution, the network often cites Lawrence Green, DrPH, who admonished, “If we want more evidence-based practice, we need more practice-based evidence.”

Some research, while scientifically rigorous, is not generalizable or not practically applicable to the real-world setting. To practicing clinicians, the network allows a place at the table to help discuss how actual clinical questions can develop into rigorous, testable hypotheses in studies led by experienced researchers. Dentists and hygienists can participate in data collection and interpretation of results, and even the dissemination of findings through publications and presentations. For the clinical researcher, the PBRN model provides access to a large network of practices that represent the profession nationally and are eager to play a role in improving clinical care. For patients, the network allows the opportunity to be represented in research and for findings to be generalizable to the broader population. Historically, much clinical oral health research has been conducted in academic health settings where a minority of people receive care. The nation’s network changes that.

Join us in improving oral health through the nation’s network

Many practitioners involved believe that the National Dental PBRN is a gift to our profession. It puts practitioners in the privileged position of helping to define and prioritize questions that are relevant to day-to-day clinical practice and their patients’ lives and to strive for results that are readily transferable.

The network is also a collegial community of life-long learners. In the first 3 years of the current funding cycle, annual regional meetings have allowed members to convene and discuss study concepts and preliminary results and to contemplate the relevance to practice. For members, the network is a source of high-quality, free continuing education, including keynote video presentations from prior network meetings. See the videos section of the public website for details at: NationalDentalPBRN.org/Videos.php. A popular feature of the network has been monthly electronic “Quick Polls” on topics that come up in everyday practice. Members can suggest engaging Quick Poll topics and develop up to five questions to see what colleagues around the nation think or are experiencing in their practices. New opportunities to engage with fellow members include a members-only moderated online discussion forum just launched at NationalDentalPBRN.org/Forums.

Do you want your clinical experience or research questions to help determine the future of the profession? If so, now is the time to engage. I strongly encourage you enroll in the network by visiting the website: NationalDentalPBRN.org. Click “Enroll Now” and follow the instructions provided. Enrollment is free and your whole team is invited to participate. You may also wish to contact us for more information. We welcome that and look forward to working with you: NationalDentalPBRN.org/Contact.php.

Acknowledgments

The National Dental Practice-Based Research Network is funded by the National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research Grant #U19-DE-22516. The author reported no conflicts of interest related to this article.

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