

OP25.2

Can we do clinical research in primary care? The experience of an urban primary health care center

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Background: Clinical research is not widely implemented in primary care. Well-organized primary care can offer excellent conditions to implement clinical research activities, particularly in chronic and prevalent diseases.

Method: In 2002 a clinical research unit accredited by the Ministry of Health was opened in a teaching primary health care center (PHC) in Barcelona that covers a population of about 20,000 people. The unit is integrated by two GPs, two research nurses and one statistician. Also, residency trainees rotate periodically in the unit. All GPs and nurses of the PHC are aware of the selection criteria of the trials, and actively collaborate in the recruitment. Patients are sent to the unit where more detailed information is offered before signing the informed consent. Patients included in trials are followed in the unit and all the information collected in the different visits is recorded. Therefore GPs and nurses can see the progress of the patient in the trial in case they are visited for any other reason. If pharmaceutical industry promotes the trial, all the economic installments are invested in research, teaching and continuing medical education.

Results: Since the creation of the unit, 65 clinical trials have been carried out, 45 of them being international, 3% are phase II, 70% phase III and 20% phase IV trials. 57% of the trials are related to cardiovascular diseases, 12% respiratory diseases, 8% GI diseases, 8% vaccination, and 15% others. Overall, 746 patients have been recruited and 537 patients have been randomized. At the present time, 5 clinical trials are ongoing. As a result of these trials 15 papers have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

Conclusions: Clinical research in primary care is feasible, does not interfere with clinical practice, and contributes with scientific knowledge that can be transferred into clinical practice.