Building a research toolkit

Collaboration is key to research and School of Medicine doctor helps pave the way with new Website

by Philip Van Hulle
Photo by David Dalton

Anne Victoria Neale, M.D., M.P.H., is one of the driving forces behind www.researchtoolkit.org, a one-stop portal assisting researchers in getting studies off the ground and collaborating.

The new watchword in medical research is “collaboration.”

The days of researchers conducting their studies in isolated labs for decades is rapidly coming to an end as federal agencies, universities and medical centers continue to rip down the walls of those former silos.

In his January 2010 “Opportunities for Research and the NIH” policy paper, Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D., director of the National Institutes of Health, noted, “The foundation of success in biomedical research has always been, and no doubt will continue to be, the creative insights of individual investigators. But increasingly those investigators are working in teams, accelerated by interdisciplinary approaches and empowered by open access to tools, databases, and technologies, so a careful balance is needed between investigator-initiated projects and large-scale community resource programs.”

A Wayne State University School of Medicine researcher has pushed collaboration one step further by becoming a driving force in the development of a one-stop, Web-based toolkit that assists researchers around the world in establishing successful multi-site study collaboration. The tool kit can be accessed at www.researchtoolkit.org.

This project was funded by a section of the National Institutes of Health called the National Center for Research Resources through its Clinical and Translational Science Award program as part of a project known as PRIMER, or Partnership-driven Resources to Improve and Enhance Research. The NCRR awarded PRIMER to the Institute for Translational Health Sciences at the University of Washington.

The study team included researchers from the University of Washington, Wayne State University, Duke University and the Group Health Research Institute, a non-proprietary, public-domain research institution.

“The site provides an assemblage of excellent research resources, particularly focusing on community-based and multi-site research,” said Anne Victoria Neale, M.D., M.P.H., a professor in the School of Medicine’s Department of Family Medicine and Public Health Sciences. “However, some also apply to single-site research. We call it a toolkit because we focused on practical resources such as templates and checklists. We also included some theoretical resources that were judged as outstanding as well.”

The multi-agency team developed the site to enhance research efficiency, to develop research networks, and to share study results, data, tools and training resources. In addition to providing an avenue for researchers to share knowledge, the site offers tools to expedite the launch of research projects. By not recreating the administrative and operational details common to most research studies, more resources can be devoted to actual medical research.

“There’s no need for researchers and project teams to start from scratch,” said Laura-Mae Baldwin, M.D., M.P.H., a University of Washington professor of Family Medicine, a practicing clinician and co-investigator on the project.

The site is expected to bring researchers around the world closer, and facilitate the speed of bench-to-bedside translational science by expanding the scope of studies and improving the statistical reliability of conclusions relative to what types of care work best to improve the health of Americans.

“ResearchToolkit.org will enable clinical investigators from multiple institutions to collaborate more efficiently and effectively on health research,” said NCRR Director Barbara M. Alving, M.D. “Ultimately, this new Web-based resource may help improve community engagement nationwide.”

The material contained within the toolkit is organized under five headings reflecting the life cycle of a research project, plus a sixth that elaborates on available resources.

“Working with multiple sites on budgeting, developing the science, initiating the research study and writing manuscripts can be especially challenging,” said Rowena Dolor, M.D., M.H.S., co-investigator and primary care research network director with the Duke University Medical Center. The site’s toolkit includes links to regulatory training, authorship guidelines and templates for consent forms.

Dr. Neale, a member of the Division of Population Health Sciences within the Department of Family Medicine and Public Health Sciences, serves as research director of MetroNet, a practice-based research network of primary care offices located in the Detroit area dedicated to answering questions about health and disease. MetroNet was launched by her department in 2001.

To ensure the site’s content remains as useful as possible to researchers across the country, the team surveyed members of the CTSA program who conduct community-based research and leaders of practice-based research networks. As part of the survey, respondents were invited to contribute resources of their own and identify unmet needs and barriers to conducting research efficiently. Responses from survey participants and systematic searches of existing large research networks helped the team identify which tools to include.

“The result is a site built by the researchers, for the researchers,” said lead investigator Sarah Greene, M.P.H., a research associate at GHRL.

“Programs such as the National Institutes of Health’s CTSA initiative and its recent Grand Opportunities funding opportunity have spurred substantial growth in multi-center research,” she explained. “This means today’s researchers are challenged to quickly surmount the logistical and operational barriers to project development. We built the ResearchToolkit.org site to help them.”