Research in General Practice
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SECOND EDITION

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In my first edition I wrote about my indebtedness to the many colleagues and friends who had helped develop my research ideas in general and had contributed to the projects which illustrated the book in particular. Many of them were friends and colleagues from my days in Glasgow and in Aberdeen and my indebtedness to them has not changed over the decade that has passed since then. Since moving to Edinburgh in 1980 I have had the help of all my colleagues in the Department of General Practice in Edinburgh, sometimes directly with the researchers described in this book and often through their taking on a much larger share of the clinical work involved in running our Department Practice than I do. In addition, new friends and supporters in the general practice and academic communities in Edinburgh have provided consistent and practical help without which the background material for this edition would not have been available.

Even if it is invidious to name particular individuals when so many have played important parts, I could not do other than put on record my special thanks to Mike Porter whose hand and heart gave guided and contributed to so many of the issues the book explores. Others, including Fiona Paxton (or McCallum) Andrew Bigg, Jo Butt, Jack Taylor and Marjan Kljakovic, have made major contributions to the projects which illustrate the theory of research method; Ianthe Dingwall-Fordyce helped again with Chapter 12, in particular with the part on ‘statistical techniques’, and Bill Dodd contributed the part on ‘computers’ in Chapter 11. Pat Oliver, my secretary, produced an immaculate typescript against pressures of time and difficulties with handwriting, and did so with a patience and commitment that I have come to rely heavily on. To all, I want to express my most sincere thanks.

For more than 25 years now, my wife Margot has been an unfailing support to me – and also a very considerable influence in helping my thinking and practice develop in the way they have; again my thanks. This book is yours too!
Preface

One of the paradoxes of general practice is that we emphasize on the one hand how important it is that the general practitioner learns to tolerate uncertainty, and then regret on the other hand that so few general practitioners research the uncertainties they find in their everyday work. In the first chapter of my first edition of this book I suggested that general practitioners were missing opportunities to take part in a fascinating and rewarding professional activity because of an unnecessary fear of the unknown, and tried to encourage more to try research for themselves. There has been an impressive increase in what has been asked about, researched and written about in the last decade and this second edition tries to bring up to date the advice I think may help others to become involved in research for themselves.

The basic principles of good research are of course timeless and apply to enquiry in any discipline. However, detail changes; there are new aids to reviewing literature, the increased emphasis in social science research has been matched by a range of new methods of collecting information, computers have revolutionized how data is handled and statistics is an ever-developing science in its own right. The chapters in this book which describe what can be referred to as the technology of the research process have been revised to reflect the impact of these recent developments rather than re-written.

The context in which the researchers of general practice take place changes much more and in a more complex and less predictable way. The studies we carry out reflect new understandings of the cause of disease and of its natural history, new systems for delivery of care and changed and changing public and professional beliefs about illness, sickness and health. And each research project reflects something of the researcher himself and also of the community he belongs to. The chapters in this book which try to describe the practice of research as against its theory have been largely re-written and a new first chapter and two new chapters at the end of the book will hopefully mean that the second edition is different enough from the first to be of help and interest to old as well as to new readers.
Preface

In one way the book has not changed. I have continued to write about research from a personal position partly because I know why I have done what I have done, and its strengths and weaknesses, in a way I cannot for the researches of others, and partly because I do believe research is at its best when the researcher believes in his question and feels for his project as it develops. I have learned a lot from doing research and enjoyed the challenge of writing about it. I hope that those who read this text will come to share my belief about the inseparability of the processes of questioning and caring in the work of a family doctor and will ask and try to answer some questions of their own.

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