



The rEACH Committee – pushing forward on our objectives and integrating activities

Background

The aim of this brief Committee report is two-fold. First, to provide a snapshot of current structure and activity, and second to signpost our direction for the next year. The rEACH Committee has undergone transformation in the past year to 18 months with the construction of flexible working sub-groups that have grown through the efforts of these enthusiastic leaders and interested EACH members. Contributions are bearing fruit as we hope will be seen in this article with brief descriptions of some of the active Sub-Groups. The model which we are applying under the joint-chair direction of Myriam Deveugele and Gerry Humphris is the fostering of short-term working groups led by motivated individuals who are able to draw together like-minded EACH members to develop a project that links to the main objectives of rEACH (Box 1). The ethos of this model of working is to retain responsiveness of the issues that are fast changing in the research environment.

An example, to illustrate, is the challenge, which by contrast will be long-term, is the burgeoning demand of elderly populations in developed countries for sensitively designed health services matching the complex needs of users. A response has been the introduction of information technology and communication science to develop new 'tools' to assist staff and service providers [1]. Much of this drive has been provider-led without careful listening to service users. Our newly constructed "Tools" group has been drawing together coding tools to assist this endeavour for researchers to assist quantification and study of the all-important interaction between 'actors' on the health delivery stage for application with older persons, carers and staff.

More generally, rEACH has been keen to respond to the expansion of membership and tangible increase in interest for researchers internationally. We are conscious that the new membership is drawn from a wider community than simply our European roots from the early inception of EACH, hence the rebranding of our organisation: The International Association of Communication in Healthcare.

Work Plan

The face-to-face workshop meetings for all those interested in rEACH are held on average, every 6 months. We have had the excellent support from the Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care at the University of Ghent, who have kindly given their accommodation free for the 2 day workshops. These lively workshops draw together the interests of the Committee members to develop projects of limited life. Once a project has fulfilled its task then it is disbanded and then a further project evolves. Members from the disbanded groups are often drawn into existing or newly formed sub-groups. Some members declare they wish to take a break. This flexibility enables EACH members to consider participation in a variety of forms and focus on their interests to further an activity in the service of rEACH.

An examination of the Aims of rEACH demonstrates a focus on early career researchers. This has been a guiding part of our ethos shared with the general aims of EACH as well as prior leaders of rEACH. This is epitomised by the Summer School which has yielded a fund of talented researchers in the health care communication area. A number of the early delegates to the Summer School now contribute importantly to research programmes of their own and collaborators. A fortunate side-effect has also been to serve EACH in various capacities.

rEACH Summer School sub-group

The Summer School sub-group of rEACH is a short-term, biennially recurring work group with the aim to organise and prepare the rEACH Summer School, a platform for motivated and talented early-career researchers in health communication to discuss issues in their work with peers and experienced facilitators. With a maximum of twelve participants, the Summer School has a small-scale, 'research retreat' feel to it, with plenty of room for personal feedback. This year, rEACH will host the fifth edition of the Summer School.

The Summer School is in line with one of the central objectives of rEACH to promote the development of researchers who are in the early stages of their career. rEACH provides a setting where early-career investigators can network with and receive mentoring from more experienced researchers and has strong links with the EACH early-career network, yEACH. Not only was yEACH originally initiated by rEACH in 2008, there is also a yEACH/rEACH liaison who is active in both the yEACH and rEACH core committee to facilitate the communication between the two committees.

Previous editions of the Summer School confirmed the value of promoting the development of early-career investigators, as they brought to light that these researchers experience various challenges, such as maintaining balance between work and personal life, prioritising work, feelings of concerns about funding and job security, feelings of isolation working on research at a small department, as well as a lack of support or opportunity to prepare publications or research proposals [2, 3]. Early-career investigators consider meeting international colleagues, including peers, and being part of a network such as EACH as essential facilitators for their career development [2, 4].

The Summer School supports early-career investigators by encouraging them to create an ongoing peer-to-peer network. In addition, it offers an environment, away from distractions, where they can discuss issues relating to their research and career with peers and receive mentoring from more experienced researchers. The Summer School is also an opportunity for early-career investigators to be exposed to the bigger picture of health communication research and in this way helps to prepare future leaders of (r)EACH.

The 2017-edition of the Summer School will be led by three facilitators with extensive experience in health communication research and an early-to-mid career facilitator. This 'junior' facilitator position, a new addition to the Summer School, will form an important link for participants to other early-career individuals in EACH through yEACH and allows for the training of the next generation of mentors within rEACH.

The Summer School is organised in conjunction with the Summer Event, as the quality content of the Summer Event workshops perfectly supplements the more mentoring-oriented programme of the Summer School. Thanks to sponsoring from EACH, Summer School participants will pay a reduced ticket price, so that also early-career researchers with a limited budget can benefit from the programme.

rEACH Tools Sub-Group

The 'Tools' sub-group has as its primary aim to create a database of the existing coding instruments for research on communication in health care. Many coding instruments have been developed and used thus far, to assess a specific or broader range of elements of medical communication [5]. Examples are the VR-CoDES, to assess patients' expressions of cues and concerns [6], and the Four Habits Coding Scheme, which more broadly assesses clinicians' communication behavior [7]. However, researchers of medical communication may have little insight into (1) which tools are available, (2) how these tools relate and compare to each other, and (3) whether or how they can be employed for their own research. The 'Tools' sub-group will create an online searchable database including information about all available measures. Information will encompass the tool's scope, setting, method, developers, developmental and validation process, as well as previous users' experiences with the tool. If freely available, the tool and its manual will be directly downloadable. The tools database will be accessible for all EACH-members on the EACH-website.

To create the database, members of the 'Tools' sub-group will consult the literature to generate a list of all relevant coding tools. Next, they will approach the developers or other relevant stakeholders to supply information about the identified tools. Finally, researchers who previously used the tools will be contacted to add their user experiences. If, once launched, the database proves well appreciated and frequently used, it may be expanded to include self-report measures within the topic of health care communication.

rEACH Funding sub-group

The aim of the funding group within rEACH is to focus on submitting applications to secure research funding for projects and initiatives within rEACH in order to contribute to enhancing international research in the area of healthcare communication.

The key research coordination objectives are 5 fold:

1. To identify research projects on the most urgent topics of healthcare communication that needs to be addressed across Europe.
2. To identify the best practices of healthcare communication research across Europe.
3. To assess quality standards of healthcare communication research across Europe.

4. To identify the most effective and efficient means of disseminating research findings in healthcare communication research between European countries and their international counterparts and to perform evaluation of dissemination.
5. To contribute to implementing research results in routine clinical practice and evaluating these steps.

Our key capacity-building objectives are:

1. To organise workshops for researchers in healthcare communication to network and exchange research experiences and findings.
2. To develop online platforms for researchers to provide a forum for discussion on relevant issues (e.g. on methodology, assessment instruments and communication protocols) in healthcare communication research.
3. To link together different organisations in Europe dealing with communication in health care by performing workshops.
4. To provide a strategy to transfer effective specific country research across other countries in Europe in the following areas: training interventions and cross culture.

Outcome of the Cost Action

The group submitted a Cost Action Application in December 2016 and are awaiting the outcome. The title was “A Network Approach on Communication in Healthcare in Europe”. The Action seeks to bring together a range of interdisciplinary professionals from EU countries and beyond working in the field of research and education in healthcare communication. We seek to organize different activities and workshops for exchanging expertise, infrastructure, knowledge and information and provide a forum for discussion on relevant issues (e.g. on methodology, assessment instruments and communication protocols) in healthcare communication research.

We are currently developing a user friendly guide of links for research funding contacts. Our objective is to also develop a targeted list of relevant funding calls in the field. The focus for our work at present is to explore new funding calls to decide on the group’s next funding application.

rEACH Content Sub-Group

The activity of this sub-group is to manage the Special Interest Groups (SIGS) and to ensure that each of them maintain a presence with regular reports and demonstration of activity. One of the issues currently is to ensure that all sections of EACH (including tEACH and pEACH) are represented in the development of the SIGs. Some of these special interests fit very well into the teaching and training field of healthcare communication and therefore there does need to be a wide dissemination and presence in the EACH organization (principally the website). This focus is for members to be able to engage with the EACH membership who volunteer their expertise and interest to generate these ‘hubs’ which includes a list of interested members and a blog space.

Conclusion

As stated, rEACH is keen to respond to the international ambitions of EACH and we have already recognized that the essence of good healthcare communication is a global phenomena [8]. rEACH wishes to expand its Committee to include research activists from north and south hemispheres and our intention is to feedback to the research community in healthcare communication our progress on this endeavor. Associated with this drive will be the bridging of our activity to dovetail effectively with our collaborative standing Committees, notably tEACH and pEACH. An example is the development of networking software across these committees to enable members to find one another according to joint interests and activity. Finally readers who are interested to contribute to our broad aims or who have specific ideas or talents they wish to share we cordially invite you contact us, through the avenues of the rEACH pages of the EACH website.

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Box 1

Aims and Objectives

The aim of rEACH is: To promote good quality communication research within EACH and to support the development of high quality researchers.

This aim can be pursued by:

1. Promoting networking
2. Promoting quality of research
3. Promoting international research collaboration
4. Promoting the developments of new young researchers

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