

EXPERIENCES OF A SLOVAK PHD PIONEER

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General practice for adults in Velky Biel, Slovakia

A – study design, **B** – data collection, **C** – statistical analysis, **D** – interpretation of data, **E** – manuscript preparation, **F** – literature review, **G** – sourcing of funding

ABSTRACT

It has all started 10 years ago, at my first WONCA Europe conference in Istanbul in 2008, where I became amazed by so many general practitioners, who performed and presented their scientific work there. However it took me 7 years since the idea to start my PhD studies until its final completion in 2017. My PhD journey wasn't straight, but rather twisty, with 2 interruptions. In 2011 I started to earn my basic research skills at 2 courses. The first one was the European General Practice Research Network (EGPRN) course in Nice and the second University of Crete's research workshop in Slovakia lead by Professor Christos Lionis.

The easiest part of my PhD studies was the clinical one – administering questionnaire and performing spirometry with my patients at my rural general practice. I also enjoyed teaching medical students at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level. I gave lectures at national conferences and published articles about general medicine in Slovak scientific journals, focusing on prevention, patient safety and respiratory diseases, especially COPD. I also contributed to two medical text books. My research was presented as posters or oral presentations at 3 WONCA Europe conferences, where I found a great space for sharing research ideas and results. Final results of my PhD thesis are going to be presented at Krakow conference.

Even though I was a fruitful author of publications, reaching the goal of an international publication was the most difficult part for me, not achievable without a help of experienced colleague, Austrian general practitioner, Professor Gustav Kamenski.

KEYWORDS: general practice, research, spirometry, COPD

ISTANBUL INSPIRATION 10 YEARS AGO

It has all started 10 years ago, in September 2008 at the WONCA Europe conference in Istanbul. That was my very first WONCA conference. I was lucky to attend – it was my „reward“ for participation at one of the first Slovak original researches performed by GPs in Slovakia – about *Helicobacter pylori* diagnosis and eradication treatment in general practices. I was amazed. Amazed by so many GPs, who performed and presented their scientific work. Who asked clinical questions and were looking for answers. It really opened my eyes.

Before I became a GP I used to work for an international contract research organisation as a clinical monitor, medical advisor and drug safety officer for phase I, II and III clinical trials. I have always been attracted to research. It also meant fun for me. Whilst working at this research company I started to miss the clinical part – the patients. So after a few years I returned to clinical medicine and opened my private general practice in a rural western Slovakia. However whilst working as a GP I missed the research part. From this point

of view it was logical to combine research and general practice in one.

In Istanbul, in a discussion with my colleague Iveta Vaverkova, who is now Slovakia EURACT representative we started to design our first research project and in 2009 we undertook a pilot project about early detection of COPD in our 2 general practices. It got quite a lot of attention among our colleagues, but finally there was no publication as a result, as we didn't know how to proceed.

EGPRN KICK OFF

I became a member of EGPRN and attended the EGPRN Research Course in Nice in May 2011 „From the idea to detailed proposal“ [1]. That exactly met what I needed. Working on my research question in detail under the leadership of Teresa Pawlikowska and Kristin Hendrickx I earned skills how to go further with my ideas:

- literature search
- how to formulate a good research question

- how to choose the appropriate method
- fundamentals in statics
- and much more.

That course was an excellent balance between theoretical and practical learning with several didactic sessions followed by (so much appreciated) discussion.

UNIVERSITY OF CRETE'S RESEARCH WORKSHOP IN SLOVAKIA

In June 2011 The Slovak Society of General Practice in collaboration with the University of Crete organized an educational workshop for Slovak GPs. This workshop focused on research in general practice and was led by the Professor Christos Lionis, a leading general medicine researcher in Europe. I think everybody knows Prof. Lionis and his overwhelming energy. He is such an inspiration for all of us. He told me during that workshop „Jana, you'll be the first professor of general medicine in Slovakia“. I laughed about his idea - I had 2 little children and a busy rural practice. There was no place for such aspirations in my head at that time. But wise Prof. Lionis planted a tiny seed into my head...

Education about research was and still is lacking in Slovakia at graduate as well as postgraduate level. Research in general practice is unfamiliar to many GPs. It was therefore a great honour that Professor Lionis accepted our invitation to Slovakia to bring local research in primary health care closer to reality [2]. I don't think anybody would ever forecast, that 5 out of all 10 participants will start PhD later on. Indeed, they did and I am the first one who completed it successfully.

AN EXOTIC PHD STUDENT

I bravely asked my former boss and a professor in pneumology Prof. Peter Krištúfek to be my PhD tutor. He was so surprised, as he has never heard about a GP PhD student. Neither have the members of entrance exams committee at the Slovak Health University in Bratislava. The professors wondered much about my motivation, but I was so contagiously enthusiastic about my research, that I got accepted. I was the first general practitioner ever accepted at PhD. A real pioneer, which I was proud of.

That was in 2010.

However it took me 7 years since the idea to start my PhD studies until it's final completion in 2017.

TWISTY PATH TO PHD

My PhD journey wasn't straight, but rather twisty. The clinical part of my research was the easiest one. I enjoyed it very much - administering questionnaire and performing spirometry with patients at my general practice. It was very rewarding - my patients

became interested into my research and supported me much.

I had to learn from my own mistakes mainly. Due to work overload and marriage storm I interrupted my PhD studies twice. Except my tutor there has been another angel, who supported me and gave me power to carry on when I was nearly giving up - Jean- Marie Degryse from the Catholic University of Leuven. He offered me to come to his university and discuss my project among his colleagues in order to get my project further. I have never accepted his offer but for several years that feeling that I could do that anytime, when I stop seeing the light at the end of my PhD tunnel, comforted me.

TEACHING AND PUBLISHING

The great part of PhD is teaching and publishing. I love both. In 2014 I started to teach general medicine undergraduate medical students at Comenius University in Bratislava. The same year I also started to teach trainees in my general practice for 2 universities - Slovak Health University in Bratislava and Jessenius Medical Faculty of Comenius University in Martin. I published several articles in Slovak scientific journals and contributed to 2 undergraduate text books [3], [4]. I presented my several researches at national conferences as well as at 3 WONCA Europe conferences, in the form of posters or oral presentations [5]. WONCA conferences are a great place to share primary care research ideas and results. At the upcoming WONCA Europe conference in Krakow the final results of my PhD thesis are going to be presented as a poster.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION

The most difficult criterion to be fulfilled at my University was the international publication, of course. I think everybody has a huge respect in the front of international peer-reviewed journals. So had I. This respect was even paralyzing me. Even though I was very fruitful author at the Slovak national level I have to admit that without the help of Austrian general practitioner Professor. Gustav Kamenski I would have never succeeded to fulfil this criterion.

As Professor Kamenski performed research on the same topic as did I (COPD), he asked me to participate at his research paper creation. My role consisted of literature search and contribution to the discussion part. Our research paper has finally been published in BMJ Open in 2015 [6].

THE FUTURE OF GENERAL MEDICINE RESEARCH IN SLOVAKIA

A few months ago I learned that I'm an inspiration for 2 of my colleagues, who started their PhD journey

just recently. I do my best to help them, to advise them in order to avoid the mistakes I made. I very much hope that with my help their PhD journey will be smoother than mine.

Research in general medicine in Slovakia is still in diapers, having a lot of childhood diseases. It'll take time until it grows up...

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