Reflections on Addiction Research Centres and the Nurturing of Creativity

In May 2009, *Addiction* published the first paper in its new series, Addiction Research Centres and the Nurturing of Creativity, a report from the Swiss Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Problems (SIPA). In this issue, we publish the final paper in the series, a report from the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) in Australia. In its 9-year history, the series has covered 23 research centres in 17 countries, including Australia, Brazil, Canada (two centres), China, Denmark, Finland, Germany (two centres), India, Japan, Korea, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand and the United States (five centres).

The series was established and overseen by Griffith Edwards, then Assistant Commissioning Editor, and Thomas F. Babor, then Associate Editor-in-Chief, with the goal of understanding more clearly the origins, financing, organization, contributions and ideologies of such centres. The initiative was seen as a component of the journal’s wider commitment to mapping and analysing how the field, very broadly, is made, enabled or stifled. The core question the series sought to answer is how the spark of true creativity in addiction science may be nurtured within the culture of a research centre.

As often happens with exercises such as this, the responses to the question varied widely. For example, the Swiss Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Problems (SIPA) cited its status as a non-governmental organization (NGO) for its ability to work creatively: NGO status “allows SIPA to conduct research and to publish and disseminate results which are perhaps unpopular or politically sensitive. To react swiftly to the latest developments, such as local policy changes or technological innovations, SIPA has sufficient resources to undertake small-scale innovative studies. It can respond quickly because it does not have to wait a year for funding agencies to assess its grant application.”

Conversely, the National Institute on Drug Dependence (NIDD) at Peking University cited its position as a national institute, and its consequent government funding, as keys to its success: “NIDD is required to complete research commissioned by governmental agencies. In recent years, most financial support for NIDD has been in the form of grants from national and municipal foundations. [...] The government has provided a number of grants to support the research activities of NIDD and permitted it to publish and disseminate its results. Moreover, the financial support for university-based research frees NIDD researchers to immerse themselves in project-related research activities.”

As one reads the papers in this series, at first there seems to be little in common among successful addiction research centres. Eventually, however, certain themes related to innovative research emerge, and chief among these are stable funding (as cited by the NIDD, above) and encouragement of cross-disciplinary research.

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) cited stable funding from the European Union as an important component of its ability to conceive and conduct large-scale projects, but the EMCDDA also felt that its true creative spark came from bringing together researchers from several different countries and cultures: “EMCDDA coordinates and relies on a network of 30 national monitoring centres, known as the Reitox network of National Focal Points (NFPs). [...] As of June 2010, the EMCDDA employs approximately 100 staff representing 18 different European nationalities. The multi-lingual working environment makes the EMCDDA a dynamic, exciting and at times challenging place to work. While the Centre’s main working language is English, all staff must speak a minimum of two EU languages and all are encouraged to learn a third. Scheduling a ‘lunch’ meeting at the Centre can be an interesting cultural challenge.”

The Department of Addictive Behaviour and Addiction Medicine at the Central Institute of Mental Health (CIMH), University of Heidelberg believed that close affiliation with a larger research university and access to patients helped to power its creativity: “Working less than 100 feet from several outstanding researchers in other fields was a key criterion to establishing a successful academic centre in addiction research in Germany. Combining leadership for research as well as for the treatment of patients with responsibility for an in-patient facility, a day clinic plus an extensive out-patient clinic proved to be an indispensable resource.”

These sentiments were echoed by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Ontario, Canada: “The umbrella and infrastructure of a health care centre with a hospital at its core, but with research, preventive services, health systems planning and community outreach as integral parts, provide a stimulating environment for research. Many of the current new initiatives stem from interdisciplinary interactions. [...] researchers from multiple disciplines meet on a regular basis and discuss common points of interest and project ideas to stimulate a more coherent research programme and even some breakthroughs rather than the traditionally more restricted activities of ‘normal science’ within departmental confines.”
While the cross-disciplinary stimulation at CIMH and CAMH might be regarded as at least partly serendipitous, other research centres built cross-disciplinary contact into their regular operations. RAND’s Drug Policy Research Center (DPRC) stated that it has made “a concerted effort since [its founding] to have the Center led by individuals with different academic backgrounds, one rooted in health issues and the other with more of a policy or systems orientation. […] The research skills of the staff have been similarly diverse. […] The DPRC functions as a virtual Center; there is no specific physical space within RAND where the Center is located. […] This physical dispersion reflects the very high value RAND places on the interaction of researchers from different disciplines and substantive areas.”

The series as a whole has provided valuable snapshots into the founding, sometimes ground-breaking research, service activities, and day-to-day operations of addiction research centres around the globe. Table 1 lists the papers that have appeared in the series, all of which are free to download as a virtual issue from Wiley: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291360-0443/homepage/addiction_research_centres_series.htm.

**Declaration of interests**

None.

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