

The past and the future of the WENR and nursing research in Europe

Invited presentation at the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Workgroup of European Nurse Researchers, September 26th 2003 in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Ladies and gentlemen, fellow nurse researchers, we are gathered here today to celebrate the 25th anniversary of WENR. It is my honour and my privilege to provide a look at the past and to look into the future of WENR and nursing research in Europe. The past are facts, the future may be fiction, only time will tell.

The first part of my presentation will focus on the underlying ideas for creating the WENR and how it all started back in 1978. The major part will be a discussion on the workgroup activities in view of the WENR's purpose. Before a conclusion can be made on visions for the future of the WENR, it is necessary to present a look at different aspects of nursing research in Europe at present. Is it possible that the WENR has a unique mission on this continent?

In the seventies nursing research in Europe generally lacked resources and educational opportunities were sparse. The number of nurses engaged in research was low compared to the number of nurses working within education and service. Many nurse researchers worked in isolation and lacked a network with whom to exchange ideas, challenges and get support.

How it all started

At the ICN congress in Tokyo in 1977 one of the issues discussed was a need for systematic cooperation within nursing research. A general agreement was made on "the need for (1) an inventory on nursing research in the countries of Europe, (2) definitions on nursing research and nurse-researchers, and (3) a liason between nurse researchers." (van Maanen 1979, 11).

This initial initiative was soon followed by a resolution to plan an informal conference for European nurse researchers. An invitation was issued to the national nurses associations with membership in the ICN within the European region of WHO to send a representative to a conference to be held in Utrecht in September 1978. Sponsors were the National Hospital Institute of the Netherlands and the National Organization of Professional Healthworkers. At that time twenty national nurses associations in Europe had membership with International Council of Nurses (ICN). Representatives from sixteen of these attended the conference in addition to observers from the ICN, WHO-European Office, Northern Nurses Federation (NNF) and the American Nurses Association (ANA).

The first point on the agenda was presentations on the status of nursing research in the countries. Eleven representatives reported. In most countries nursing studies were scattered and few and mostly single and small scale. Furthermore, education in nursing differed dramatically in terms of research education. Being present at this conference 25 years ago I still remember the striking contrasts in the reports, from those countries in which there was absolutely no research neither courses in research appreciation or research methods to countries where university degrees in nursing (PhDs) had been established. United Kingdom was at that time on the forefront in this regard and had also nursing research units in place and funding for research in nursing as well. I believe the general feeling was “We are worlds apart!”

The key note address was held by Lisbeth Hockey, then in the position of Director at the Nursing Research Unit in the Department of Nursing Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her speech focused the conference theme: *Collaborative research and its implementation in nursing*. This address was inspiring, thoughtful and challenging in regard to the possibilities of realizing such an endeavour among European nurse researchers. Hence, our spirits were raised and engaged discussions followed.

At this first meeting much time was used to clarify meanings of central concepts to secure that we had common reference points. Two examples can illustrate this discussion. A distinction between *cooperation* and *collaboration* was made. The literal meaning of collaboration, namely *labouring together* made sense. We agreed on collaboration as this implied more commitment from every country to the issues at hand than mere passive cooperation. In the present WENR we know this distinction is of relevance due to differences among the NNAs in terms of contributions in the WENR.

Obviously, we had to clarify the meaning of nursing research. Is this research done by nurses or research in nursing? Is nursing research - research in clinical nursing or encompassing also the educational and administrative aspects of the profession? It is of interest to note that these questions are still debated. Back in 1978 it was not possible for us present to reach an agreement on this issue. Hence, the group's decision of definitions was postponed to the following meeting.

In spite of disagreement on definitions, the group viewed collaboration in nursing research to be desirable since, and I quote from the statements made at this meeting:

- the development of nursing research within the countries of Europe could be stimulated;
- it could give support to researchers working in isolated situations and
- allow others to learn from those with more experience in research....
- provide a forum for the exchange of knowledge in relation to nursing research
- [and meet] a need for peer critique ...an accepted means for maintaining high standards in research. (WENR 1979, 121).

Also, there was a general agreement on the need to meet again as a working group. It was an open question, however, whether this “should be an independent, self-financing unit with personal membership, or a group connected with the National Nurses Associations.” (Lerheim

1988, 6). The need of an umbrella organisation was also discussed. The recommendations for the NNAs also included that the same representatives had to meet the next time to avoid starting anew in discussions. Also, a steering group was decided on to be responsible for planning the next meeting. When leaving Utrecht on the final day I believe all of us had a feeling of being participating in something of great importance for nursing research in Europe.

In 1979 the group met in Copenhagen where the organization of the group and the funding of its future activities were further explored. The recommendations brought back to the NNAs for approval included (1) an outline of the organisation and funding of WENR as we know it today (financed by the NNAs in ICN membership within the WHO-Euro region) and (2) a draft on the guidelines and regulations. The NNAs gave their approval and on the third meeting, which was held in Athens in October 1980, the Workgroup of European Nurse Researchers was a reality when the Guidelines and Regulations were finally ratified.

WENR's purpose and its fulfilment

The purpose of the work group was stated as: to strengthen collaboration between nurse-researchers in order to promote growth and development of nursing research as one means for contributing to high standards of care. The guidelines listed eight activities aimed at achieving this purpose and three were given priority:

- providing a forum of exchange of information about research in nursing in European countries
- stimulating the dissemination and discussion of research findings
- providing a means of communication between nurses about nursing research (WENR 1980/1987).

The annual meetings and the biennial open conferences have been the main activities of WENR to fulfil its purpose. The annual meetings for the NNAs representatives have in addition to key note addresses included a report on the status of nursing research in each country, all made official in proceedings. The biennial open conferences have been forums for presentation of research primarily from Europe but also other countries. Proceedings from these conferences are published.

An examination of the publications from the two types of events allows me to present some fact about these key activities of the WENR.

The annual meetings. The WENR has held a total of 25 annual meetings, the present being the 26th. Seventeen countries have hosted the meetings, from Iceland in the west to Israel in the east, from Northern to Mediterranean countries. Representatives from most of the NNAs with ICN membership have attended during these 25 years. Presently 30 European nurse associations are members of ICN. The number of representatives in the meetings has varied from 15 to 22. Some NNAs have had representatives at each meeting, others have attended more sporadically, and some has never attended these meetings. A total of about 440 national reports have been presented and published in the 25 proceedings from these annual meetings.

The annual reports create an important knowledge base of activities related to nursing research in the participating European countries, since each country address the issues of research education, completed and ongoing research, dissemination and utilization of research. In addition, the keynote addresses given reflect what has been considered important issues in nursing research in Europe throughout the 25 years. Although their content varies and some country reports are missing, these reports may be the best source of information that exists regarding nursing research on the regional level. This knowledge base ought to be

given a systematic analysis as it may reveal important aspects of the development of nursing research throughout Europe these 25 years.

The open conferences. The open conferences have been the major activity as a forum for dissemination and discussion of research findings. The first one was held in Uppsala, Sweden in 1982, the last one in Geneva, Switzerland in 2002. Altogether eleven open conferences have been arranged by the WENR and hosted by the national nurse association. Nurses throughout Europe and other continents have had the opportunity to present their research and interact with other researchers. Neophyte researchers as well as seasoned researchers have contributed at these conferences. I believe that the conferences have been a critical first experience for novice researchers to present their research to an international audience.

In the published proceedings close to 1500 studies are reported, as well as key note papers. I have no record of the number of abstracts evaluated by the scientific committees, but obviously the number is much higher. Participation at the biennial conferences has varied from 250 to 600; most of the conferences have had more than 350 participants. Participants have come from 20 to 29 countries and several times nurses from four continents have attended (See Table 1).

Workshops and seminars on specific themes have also been arranged in most conferences. These forums have clearly provided for discussion, critique, and learning. Papers from these forums have also been included in the proceedings. Most of the proceedings are now in archives, some are on the bookshelf of those that attended. An important question is whether these have been studied and have made an impact outside the conference rooms? Have the nurse associations and their representatives drawn enough attention to these reports? As most of the studies reported are European, the publications are

extremely valuable in terms of knowledge about actual nursing research in our region over a period of 25 years.

In view of the purpose – to contribute to high standards of nursing practice – it is of interest to mention a systematic analysis on the papers published from the first seven conferences by Lerheim (1995). Ms. Lerheim was a longstanding member of the WENR Steering group. She stated: “these publications reflect more interest in and concern for nurses, their work conditions and job satisfaction than for nursing, patients, their health condition and their satisfaction with nursing care” (1995, 3). She reported that only 180 of the about 680 studies she reviewed were directly related to clinical effectiveness. Whether this trend continued in the next four conferences has not been explored. A cursory glance on the later proceedings gave the impression that more studies are focused on patient care.

There has clearly been much activity on behalf of the WENR in terms of dissemination and collaboration. It seems relevant to ask whether the work-group has been just a meeting place for exchange or has it also made an impact on the development of nursing research in Europe? This is of course a question impossible to answer.

All of us who have been involved in the WENR would like to believe, however, that the reported studies at the conferences have made an impact. According to Weiss (1980) dissemination of new knowledge may take two routes in terms of utilization in the real world, namely (a) the direct use of research findings in practice or (2) an indirect use in terms of creating a new context for understanding, with new ideas and new ways to look at practice which in turn may change that practice. It is not unreasonable to believe that indirect utilization may have taken place on an individual level.

Contact with other organizations. The WENR has also engaged in another activity related to its purpose “promoting contact with other organizations and institutions that may influence

the development of nursing research” (WENR Guidelines, 1980/1987, pt. 2.25). From its beginning observers from other organizations have been present at annual meetings and conferences, notably the Northern Nurses Federation who has attended all meetings. The ICN, WHO-Euro and the American Nurses’ Association were present the first three years during the creation of the workgroup and at most of the following conferences. Also, national nurses’ associations from other continents have had their observers (Canadian, Japanese, and Chinese). The input from the observers has been invaluable to the group, both through lecturing on key issues in nursing and through participation in the discussions.

WENR in the recent past

Since the mid-nineties the WENR has added a more proactive approach in its activities. The annual meeting in Stockholm in 1996 agreed that, “a review of WENR’s role, function and relationships in the new European Structures for Nurses was an issue of great importance” (WENR, 1996, 141). It appears that this was the first of several meetings in which the Standing Committee of Nurses of the EU (PCN) has had an observer present, thus a link has been made to an European organization.

In 1997, Alison Tierney, member of the Steering group at that time, expressed that WENR had changed from “[being] focused on their role as NNA *representatives*, working as a channel of communication between WENR and their NNA; ... [to] become a more active *working group*....[involved in shaping] the strategic development of nursing research throughout Europe ...” (Tierney 1997, 5).

At the annual meeting in Reykjavik in 2000 it was decided to explore the possibilities for some type of collaboration with the PCN. An agreement on intentions in this regard between the WENR and the PCN was reached in the Spring of 2003. This relationship may become critical in shaping the future of WENR.

The Reykjavik meeting also laid the ground for a significant document, a Position paper on nursing research which was finalized in 2002 (WENR, 2002). An abstracted version of the position document have been translated into local languages and published nationally, thus becoming known to a larger audience of nurses throughout Europe. Examining the facts in the past brings us to look into the future of WENR and nursing research in Europe. However, to have any visions on what the future might be requires a look at nursing research in Europe as it is today.

Nursing research in Europe at present

Nursing research in most European countries has changed dramatically since the first meeting in 1978. Many countries have degree programmes, a great number of nurses have earned their doctoral degrees, the number of studies has greatly increased and conditions for carrying out research have improved. On the national levels there has been an accumulation of nursing knowledge, i.e. theories, methodologies, clinical guidelines etc., however, these are not always published in the English language. WENR has provided an important forum for information about national research activities not published in an international language.

Since its start the key words in the WENR have been: communication, collaboration and dissemination. Today WENR compete in these activities with many others.

Collaboration in nursing research is done on different arenas. There are many examples of studies in which European nurses collaborate in research and also with colleagues from other continents (Kim et al, 1993; Lorensen et al, 1993; Kierney et al, 2000; Lauri et al, 2001; Evers, 2003). One example from the early 90's are research projects based on the theoretical framework of Orem's Self-Care Deficit theory which included nurse researchers from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway (Lorensen et al, 1993). In 2003 Evers reported of large scale programs of research within the same framework

involving many of the European countries. Collaboration in nursing research crossing the borders of continents are exemplified by the studies of patient-nurse collaboration (Kim et al, 1993) and decision-making in nursing (Lauri et al, 2001).

Another arena of collaboration and dissemination is the nursing research societies, nursing academies and interest groups. During the past 25 years such groups have been established in a number of countries, within or outside the professional nurses' association. Network groups across borders are also in place. The Nordic Academy of Nursing Science, the Nordic College of Caring Science (NCCS), and the European Academy of Nursing Science are noteworthy examples. The first two such are providing forums for discussion, critique, and exchange of new knowledge. The European Academy of Nursing Science was established in 1997 to collaborate in doctoral education of nurses across Europe (Crow, 2001; Hansen, Natvig & Hanestad, 2003). Presently this collaborative venture includes 12 European countries with faculty from 19 European universities (Lorensen, 2003).

The growth of published nursing research is an arena on which WENR compete. New nursing research journals have come into publication; one example is the Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences established by the NCCS, which have expanded to attract also international authors and audience. An increasing number of national nursing research journals provide nurses with a means of communication of their research in their own language and to their national colleagues. English abstracts make this research known internationally.

Finally, the many nurse specialist groups are other arenas for dissemination of and collaboration in nursing research. Many have their own research forums and arrange conferences which are increasingly focused on research presentations within their field.

Visions for the future of WENR

In view of the present state of collaboration and dissemination in nursing research in Europe, a timely question one must ask is whether there is a future for the WENR? I believe a positive answer is linked to WENR's unique **composition** and **position** on the European continent.

WENR is a Euro-wide group based in the National Nurses Associations. This is a composition which provides for a unique communication channel between local and regional levels. Furthermore, its position as a focal point for nurse researchers can be utilized to develop WENR as a resource centre on nursing research in Europe. As in the past, its aim will be to further the development of nursing research to contribute to high standards of patient care. This vision will require some changes in the activities of the group; I will give you some examples:

Alternatives to arranging research conferences for presentations of studies are:

- To arrange seminars for nurse researchers for planned peer review on their work with critical reflections and discussions.
- To arrange seminars for experienced nurse researchers to further the development on research design and methodology for clinical studies

To be a resource centre the following activities may be needed:

- To develop a research platform on its website to include for example
 1. a bank of research instruments relevant to nursing research, and translated versions of these,
 2. a directory of nurse researchers across Europe, indexed according to substantive area and methodology
 3. a direct link to academies/societies/interest group for nursing research
 4. a directory of nurse-researchers who are interested in collaborative research across border
 5. a directory of nurse-researchers who is willing to engage in advisory work on nursing research for individual, groups, institutions and organisations.
- The link to the PCN appears to be extremely important and has to be developed into concrete actions.
- Registration on the development of nursing research across Europe has to continue in the form of annual reports. These add to a unique archive of historical

information and provide a record of the development of nursing research in Europe. The representatives will play an important part in developing the WENR as a resource centre, since they will have to collect and update the information needed. Therefore, I believe it should be required that the NNAs do appoint active researchers as their representatives.

Obviously, the future of WENR depends on the funding of its activities. If the NNAs value the WENR as a resource centre of importance both on a local and regional level, a commitment for funding the activities must continue. However, we know that this also may be dependent on a clear commitment from all NNAs. Other funding has been explored, f.ex. the possibility of becoming a partner in EU's 6th framework programme. However, we now realize that this is not a possible source of funding, but maybe the EU's 7th programme.

In closing: I believe WENR has come to the point where wisdom from the past has great significance for its future. In 1978 we agreed on focusing on collaboration instead of mere cooperation. "Labouring together" is also the key to realize the visions for the future for WENR and nursing research in Europe, and it is still important that countries in different stages of nursing research development work together in this group.

Thank you for your attention!

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Review of activities of WENR based on
WENR Proceedings from annual meetings (1978-2002) and conferences (1982-2002)

Table 1 Open conferences arranged by WENR 1982-2002

Year	Place	Host	Theme	Studies reported	Attendents (approx.)	No. of countries
1982	Uppsala Sweden	Swedish Nurses Association	Research – a challenge for nursing practice	59	350	26
1984	London UK	Royal College of Nursing	Nursing research – does it make a difference?	61	600	27
1986	Helsinki Finland	Finnish Federation of Nurses	Collaborative research and its implementation in nursing	87	300	24
1988	Jerusalem Israel	National Association of Nurses in Israel	Nursing practice – a challenge to nursing research	105	250	29
1990	Budapest Hungary	Nursing Committee of the Hungarian Hospital Federation	Collaborative research and its implementation in nursing	115		
1992	Madrid Spain		No information available			
1994	Oslo Norway	Norwegian Nurses Association	The contribution of nursing research. Past-present-future	120	450	29
1996	Stockholm Sweden	Swedish Association of Health Officers	Research on nursing throughout the life-span	119	350	24
1998	Helsinki Finland	Finnish Federation of Nurses	Knowledge development in nursing: Clinicians and researchers in partnership?	267	565	27
2000	Reykjavik Iceland	Iceland Nurses Association	Challenges for nurses in the 21 st century: Health promotion, prevention and intervention	249	470	29
2002	Geneva Switzerland	Swiss Nurses Association	Practice & Research – A joint adventure	150	380	20