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| Host department: Cambridge |
| Project Title: Understanding the determinants of the initiation and maintenance of behaviour change. |
| Proposed supervisory team: |
| Simon Griffin – Professor of General Practice, clinical epidemiology, trials  Dr Amy Ahern – Investigator Scientist MRC Epidemiology Unit Cambridge, behavioural science, weight management |
| Potential for cross consortium networking and educational opportunities: |
| There is very strong potential for cross-consortium networking. There are existing collaborations on this topic with Southampton, Oxford, Bristol and University College London. The existing data available for analysis are derived from observational studies and trials conducted in collaboration with other members of the consortium (in particular Oxford) and several other centres outside the consortium. |
| Project description: |
| To develop effective interventions to support people to make sustained changes in behaviour, we must understand the determinants of initiation and maintenance of behaviours. Research on the development of behavioural interventions has been hampered by a focus on limited models of behaviour change that ignore the complexity of human behaviour, the disconnect between intention and action, and the importance of contextual factors. Our understanding of the determinants of behaviour has been constrained by reliance on small, unrepresentative samples, short-term follow up, and use of self-reported behaviour measures. Many popular theories of behaviour change have been shown to be poor predictors of behaviour when studied using more rigorous methods, making it unsurprising that interventions based on these theories have had little success.  The proposed PhD will examine the multi-level determinants of the initiation and maintenance of behaviour change and the extent to which existing interventions are able to modify these determinants. It will likely use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods but the exact methods and research questions will be guided by the interests and experience of the student. Data is available from a number of large observational studies and randomised controlled trials led by the study supervisors, with longitudinal data, objective clinical measurements, and detailed measures of behavioural, psychological, social and environmental factors. Some of these studies also include objective measures of diet and physical activity. There is also the opportunity to conduct primary data collection using qualitative and quantitative research methods, including ecological momentary assessment (repeated sampling of subjects’ experiences in real time using mobile technology) and objective measures of cognitive biases (e.g. response inhibition and food responsiveness). |
| Indicative project costs: |
| For accessing existing data there would be no costs. For new quantitative and qualitative studies there would be costs associated with participant recruitment and data collection. |
| Training and development provision by host: |
| *Formal training:*  Supported by the supervisory team, the successful candidate would develop a bespoke training plan informed by the learning needs and experience of the successful candidate. This will include attendance at training courses on qualitative and quantitative methods, study design, ethics and governance, involving patients/research participants/the public, dissemination, preparing for life after the PhD etc, both within and outside the University of Cambridge. There are opportunities to participate in modules on the MPhil in Primary Care Research course. The PhD student will also be encouraged to consider training courses that will benefit their wider development as an academic GP. The student will be a member of a Cambridge college. |
| *Informal training:*  The PhD will be carried out within a supportive multi-disciplinary environment that includes social  scientists, behavioural scientists, statisticians, health economists, and clinical expertise in nursing,  general practice, and public health. The wider research programme involves expertise both within the  UK and internationally. There are many opportunities to attend seminars and lectures within the  Primary Care Unit, the MRC Epidemiology Unit, the wider Department, the Clinical School and  indeed the wider University. There are also opportunities for presentation of projects and receipt of feedback at ‘work in progress’ meetings.  The successful candidate would be embedded within a supportive and collaborative research team that holds regular meetings addressing personal and professional development, in which colleagues share strategies and offer mutual support with potential challenges such as time management and career development. There is a peer group for PhD students who also form writing groups with peers and post-docs. As well as supervisors there are post-doc members of the group available to provide advice on scientific and logistical matters. They also have access to methodological support from the Primary Care Unit Methods Hub. Students will also be members of a college which provides a supportive academic environment with particular attention to pastoral care. |
| *PPIE:* The proposal and related studies have been developed with input from experts-by-experience as patients, providers, commissioners and other key stakeholders. who are co-investigators on the wider NIHR study. They will be available to support the successful candidate with developing the research study, refining research questions, selecting variables, ensuring the appropriateness of study materials, analysing qualitative data and dissemination. |