

The Founding of WReN
By
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At the 1987 Annual Meeting, the [WAFP](#) Research Committee proposed to the Board of Directors that the 115 Wisconsin family physicians who had indicated an interest in research be invited to form a formal research network, the Wisconsin Research Network (WReN). This proposal was approved and the Research Committee of the WAFP became the first Steering Committee of WReN. The first meeting of WReN took place at the WReN Founding Conference in Wausau on October 9 and 10, 1987.

Since shortly after joining the UW faculty, I had a dream of building bridges between the community of practicing Family Physicians and academia (also known as "academentia") for purposes of education as well as research. I had heard of some practice-based primary care research networks such as the Ambulatory Sentinel Practice Network (ASPN) and the Dartmouth Coop. With a "go-ahead" from the Department of Family Medicine (DFM as it was in those years -- there was considerable flexibility in how we invested our time then) and initial funding from the Wisconsin Academy of Family Physicians (WAFP) Foundation (then known as the Wisconsin Institute for Family Medicine) we started to pull together community physicians (Dr. David Hahn foremost among them) to provide a laboratory for primary care research. The old WReN started as a project of the WAFP and the Research Committee of the WAFP served as the governing steering committee for WReN.

We realized that, as one Minnesota faculty said, "Doing primary care research in an academic medical center is like doing forestry research in a lumber yard." We got advice from Paul Nutting, MD who was the Director of ASPN who encouraged us to do "research about the problems most of the people have most of the time." We had a vision of a national "network of networks" headed by ASPN. We also had connections to some networks in other countries, most notably the "other WREN" (the Wessex Research Network based in the UK). There were arguments, very friendly, about which one was the "real WReN."

Our initial partnerships were problematic as we had very limited support for infrastructure – and really didn't know how to budget or plan for projects. But we pushed ahead with some initiatives such as electronic communications ("PC Talk" which came on two 5-1/4 inch floppy disks) and communicated over a 1200 baud modem connection if anybody remembers those. Our annual meetings were in Wausau where we had a retreat-like atmosphere. By the end of my tenure we would get over 80 people at the meetings. Several UW researchers ([Patrick McBride, MD](#), and [Michael Fleming, MD](#)) were able to provide some support by writing us into their funding applications, but our capability was still limited. Nonetheless, they were both able to publish significant work with the help of WReN's community base.

Our staff deserves special mention. Mary Stone who served as secretary (“...and do you want to talk with the person in charge – or the one who knows what’s going on?”), Narra Smith Cox, Ph.D., Barbara Livingston, BS, and Pamela Wiesen, BS. We did have, despite the problems, a lot of fun with this new venture.