Profile

Pioneer of a Young Discipline

How do you become a health services researcher? We visited Antje Timmer, Professor of Epidemiology and Biometry, at the Faculty of Medicine

"Originally I wanted to be an ordinary doctor working in a hospital," Antje Timmer recalls. But the question of how to best help patients led her to her current field of medical research – health services research – and to the new department of the same name at the University of Oldenburg.

A meeting in her office on a summer day. A quarter of a year after her appointment as professor, the specialised literature has long since been lined up on the shelves behind her desk. A stuffed toy rat also peeps over Timmer’s shoulders from the shelves. She can’t remember where it came from, but says it’s been with her “for a long time.” There’s also a card from her colleagues in Groningen, the Netherlands, congratulating her on her appointment as Professor of Epidemiology and Biometry in the joint degree programme “European Medical School Groningen.”

Timmer herself comes from Kleve, a town in Germany’s Lower Rhine region near the Dutch border, and she speaks the language of the neighbouring country. Having received Dutch lessons at school, she took the opportunity as a young doctor in her practical year to “do health services in Dutch, emergen-
ty admissions – the whole spectrum.”

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Her initial plan of both practicing medicine and conducting research, and combining the two professionally, proved unworkable for her in the long term. She explains that this may be common for example in Canada, where from 1996 to 1998 she completed a master’s degree in clinical epidemiology. “Then you have certain days on which you work in medi-
cal practice and other days for research.” However that means focussing intensely on the same subject in both fields, she explains. “But I don’t want to spend my whole life researching a single disease; the scientific freedom is what I enjoy.”

So health services research was a lo-
gical choice for Antje Timmer. It tied in with her goal of combining the re-
search and practice of health services and was therefore a “natural result of this constellation”, as she puts it. In the course of her career she has studied the effectiveness of health services at various academic locations – although the relatively young term “Versorgungsfors-
schung” (health services research) wasn’t always used to describe her work. “With the benefit of hindsight” she says, “you realise that the path you take in life is mapped out by a much stronger red line and meaningfulness than you would have thought along the way.”

For example she designed meta-analyses of clinical studies at the German Cochrane Centre in Freiburg – an im-
portant instrument in her field of re-
search. At the Ludwig Maximilian Uni-
versity of Munich she coordinated one of the world’s most comprehensive re-
gisters of chronic inflammatory bowel diseases in children and youths, and for years she trained physicians and future epidemiologists in Munich, Freiburg, Berlin, Bielefeld and Mainz, as well as helping colleagues to evaluate clinical studies or realise their PhD and habili-
tation ambitions. Most recently Timmer headed the “Drug Utilisation and Health Services” unit at the Leibniz Institute for Prevention Research and Epidemiology in Bremen.

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In this context, Timmer stresses, she can teach her students right from the start about how useful the different scientific methods are as tools, as well as how to use them. “My goal is that students gain a somewhat better under-
standing than in conventional degree programmes of the fact that epidemiology and biometry are useful subjects for a physician; subjects that they must master – and that can also be fun. We want to become the method centre for health services research in Germany.”

At present Timmer is busy defining the focuses of her research work more precisely: “Our cooperation with Gro-
ningen is particularly important to us in this respect, and we have the first ideas for joint studies – however they’re at a very early stage at the moment.” She is also taking advantage of the opportunity that being based in Oldenburg offers to analyse the data in the epidemiological cancer register for Lower Saxony, which is located here.

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Each year are lacking in terms of method, particularly in the area of health services research. “This is where you can tell this is a young discipline,” Timmer comments.

She points out that different approaches and perspectives have just started to come together within this discipline. “When I work together with others I see more and more each time how much everyone benefits from each other,” says Timmer, who in her spare time plays the violin in a Bremen chamber orchestra, and enjoys harmonising with others there too. In the Spring School of the German “Health Services Research Net-
work” she once again collaborated with lecturers from many different disci-
Plines – and with different approaches to health services research – and again she made the observation: “We complement one another perfectly.” (ds)