

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 shoulder 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 Oldenburg-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, emergency admissions – the whole spectrum“. Her vocabulary may have become a little rusty in the meantime, but she says: “I like talking in Dutch and I understand it too.“

Timmer, 47, studied medicine in Hannover. In addition to practical work at the University Clinic in Essen she wrote her MD thesis under the supervision of

Prof. Dr. Harald Goebell on the subject of chronic inflammatory bowel diseases. She continued to study the impact of these diseases on patients’ quality of life while she was writing her habilitation treatise and at the same time specialising in internal medicine at Regensburg University Clinic. She earned her habilitation in 2006, by which point her penchant for research was clear: “In health services you have to react above all to medical needs and have few possibilities to be creative – in research you have more leeway.“

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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 medical 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 logical 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 “Versorgungsforschung“ (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 important instrument in her field of research. At the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich she coordinated one of the world’s most comprehensive registers 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 habilitation ambitions. Most recently Timmer headed the “Drug Utilisation and Health Services“ unit at the Leibniz Institute for Prevention Research and Epidemiology in Bremen.

The new professorship at Oldenburg University therefore seemed tailor-made for her. „When I saw the call for applications – and in a new medical faculty as well – it was clear: this suits me perfectly!“ Timmer recalls. The internationality of it appealed to her, as well as the



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unusual grouping of many “classical chairs“ under the aegis of health services research. In this constellation, she explains, she can apply the whole range of her experience.

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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 understanding 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 Groningen 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.

Whether she is evaluating other people’s scientific papers or writing her own, Timmer always puts particular emphasis on the quality of a study. “I’m very critical when it comes to methodology,“ she says, noting that quite a few of the countless medical studies carried out

each year are lacking in terms of method, particularly in the area of health services research. “This is where you can tell this is still 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 Network“ she once again collaborated with lecturers from many different disciplines – and with different approaches to health services research – and again she made the observation: “We complement one another perfectly.“ (ds)