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Partnering to Advance Health Equity and a Welcome Opportunity to Gather: Proceedings From the 28th Annual Conference of the Health Care Systems Research Network

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Abstract

In April 2022, the Health Care Systems Research Network (HCSRN) — a consortium of 20 research institutions affiliated with large health systems spread across the United States (and one in Israel) — held its 28th annual conference in Pasadena, California, with 275 researchers, health care colleagues, and external academic partners in attendance. With a conference theme of “Promoting Collaboration and Partnerships to Advance Health Equity,” the scientific program was assembled by a multisite planning committee with input from representatives of informal local host Kaiser Permanente Southern California. Objectives of the annual conference are to showcase scientific findings from HCSRN projects and to spur collaboration on research initiatives that improve health and health care for individuals and populations. To those ends, the NIH Pragmatic Trials Collaboratory sponsored a preconference workshop on the essentials of embedded pragmatic clinical trials, and more than a dozen scientific interest groups and active research project teams held ancillary sessions throughout the conference. This welcome opportunity for network members to meet in-person followed a 2-year hiatus necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which HCSRN conference proceedings were conducted through virtual and written communication platforms. (*J Patient Cent Res Rev.* 2022;9:193-195.)

Keywords

research; collaboration; health equity; conference proceedings; learning health system; pragmatic trials

The Health Care Systems Research Network (HCSRN) is a consortium of 20 not-for-profit research institutions embedded within or otherwise affiliated with large integrated health systems. HCSRN, originally established in 1994 as the HMO Research Network with 8 organizational members, has grown over time both in membership size and organizational diversity but continues to reflect the founding capacity to study health, health care, and outcomes in large, defined cohorts of health plan members/health system patients.¹ Now with the ability to represent more than 2000 scientists and research staff working at member organizations, HCSRN remains committed to public domain, population-based collaborative research to improve the delivery of health care and enhance the health and well-being of patients and communities. The network meets its objectives by: fostering partnerships among member site research teams, parent health systems, external investigators, and potential sponsors with a common

commitment; sharing effective methodologies and best practices across sites; maintaining tools for efficient collaboration, including standardized data resources; and disseminating information on research capacity and scientific accomplishments of members.²

First held in 1995, HCSRN’s annual conference has been a primary platform to support the network’s efforts to provide value for member organizations and to contribute to the broader scientific enterprise. The meeting has appeared on the spring calendar every year since, and conference proceedings have been published in recent years, including the abstracts accepted for the 2020 conference,³ which was cancelled as a distinct event due to the COVID-19 pandemic and replaced with a small webinar series, and the abstracts presented at the 2021 conference, which was held in virtual format and centered around the timely theme “Looking Forward and Embracing Change: Preparedness for the Future During Uncertain Times.”⁴

Convened in-person for the first time since the 25th annual conference in 2019,⁵ this article provides a summary of HCSRN’s 28th annual conference, held April 11–14, 2022, in Pasadena, California. Inspired by the theme “Promoting Collaboration and Partnerships to Advance Health Equity.” the conference agenda

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and scientific program were developed by a multisite planning committee for just the fourth time, following a long history of annual conferences being organized by individual member site hosts. A large contingent of planners on the multisite committee came from Kaiser Permanente Southern California (Pasadena, CA), which served as an informal local host for this year's meeting.

A complete set of the scientific abstracts accepted for presentation at this year's conference are reported separately within this same issue of the *Journal of Patient-Centered Research and Reviews*.⁶

Plenary Sessions Addressing Health Equity

The conference opened with a welcome address from Benjamin Broder, MD, assistant medical director for quality and clinical analysis at Southern California Permanente Medical Group and interim senior scientific director of the Kaiser Permanente Southern California Department of Research and Evaluation. Subsequently, the conference's thematic focus on partnerships for equity was voiced prominently in the opening plenary session delivered by Lori Carter-Edwards, PhD, MPH, assistant dean for community engagement and professor of health systems science at the Kaiser Permanente Bernard J. Tyson School of Medicine. In her compelling presentation, "Are You Really Ready to Do the Work? Shifting the Research Paradigm Through Meaningful and Equitable Collaborations," Dr. Carter-Edwards set the stage by reflecting on trustworthy community engagement as a foundation for community action, transformation, and achieving health equity. She described partnership with a faith-based community network as an example of a "practice to research" framework and shared the design, aims, and products of a risk communication pilot study that leveraged this collaboration. It is notable that over the course of the conference, other presenters repeatedly referenced this session and the key insights provided by Dr. Carter-Edwards. The question-and-answer period, organized by session moderator and discussant Leslie Hinyard, PhD, MPH, chair of the Department of Health and Clinical Outcomes Research at Saint Louis University, provided additional insights and context on meaningful engagement.

The closing plenary session on the final day of the conference addressed the equity theme via a presentation by Teaniese Davis, PhD, MPH, on diversity supplement funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Dr. Davis, a research investigator from Kaiser Permanente Georgia, described the eligibility and application process for these supplemental awards, with additional focus on the importance of the mentorship and training plan. She also described a number of

examples of critical "pipeline" programs fostering the development of new research talent in historically disadvantaged and underrepresented groups that are the targets of diversity supplements. Additional information on relevant research funding opportunities was presented in an excellent overview by Brent Sandmeyer, MPH, a senior program officer and lead on climate change and health care for the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), who described the range of funding vehicles available, supplied examples of existing AHRQ-funded projects within the HCSRN, and gave helpful guidance for submitting successful research proposals and applications. His presentation was coupled by insights from session moderator Katherine Sanchez, PhD, LCSW, a research investigator from Baylor Scott & White Health, who described her personal experience in the pursuit of AHRQ funding.

Abstract and Panel Presentations

Over the 3-day conference, a total of 13 concurrent sessions featured 49 individual oral abstract presentations spanning the general categories of health equity and social needs, health care delivery, population health improvement, COVID-19, chronic conditions/aging/multimorbidity, data science and informatics, mental health, digital health and technologies, and behavioral health. More than 75 additional abstracts were presented as scientific posters during two separate poster sessions.⁶

Another highlight of this and recent HCSRN conferences was the series of submitted methodological panel sessions designed to provide lessons learned and other guidance on managing challenges in the conduct and translation of multisite collaborative research. Example topics from among the 11 panel sessions presented at the 2022 conference included: developing partnerships for culturally relevant patient outreach for colorectal cancer screening in Latino populations; feasibility of screening for social needs in health system patients; use of a health system-based medical school as a pipeline for developing health equity researchers; and considerations in universal return of aggregate research results to study participants. Additional "how to" information reached HCSRN members in the form of a well-attended preconference workshop sponsored and delivered by the NIH Pragmatic Trials Collaboratory on the essentials of embedded pragmatic clinical trials.

The conference schedule was further supplemented with a variety of ancillary meetings for scientific interest groups and active research project teams to gather together and work toward specific objectives. The chance to engage and network with colleagues was the leading reason that attendees gave for why they came to the conference.

As always, one of these ancillary sessions was a nearly full-day affair for the Virtual Data Warehouse (VDW) Implementation Group, which includes programmers, investigators, and other staff who work on the development and maintenance of HCSRN's federated VDW data model, one of the network's key assets.⁷

State of the Network, Award Winners

One other plenary session, delivered by Robert Greenlee, PhD, MPH, senior research scientist at Marshfield Clinic Research Institute and chair of the HCSRN Board of Governors for 2021 and 2022, encompassed the traditional state of the network address. As this was the first full presentation on network business since 2019, it contained many important updates for attendees. For background, Dr. Greenlee provided a brief history of HCSRN and of its annual conference, with recognition that the stated purposes for convening the first annual meeting remain relevant today. Attendees learned more about the recent growth of the network, which added Saint Louis University in 2020 and Advocate Aurora Health in 2022. Also presented was an update on the network's strategic planning process and a brief preview of the upcoming website redesign. Finally, a development that generated the most discussion during the question-and-answer session was HCSRN's recent transition of executive/operational leadership from a hired executive director model to an association management firm, Capitol Hill Management Services (CHMS). HCSRN has asked CHMS to assist in the network's desired move from an informal membership coalition structure to a formal not-for-profit corporation structure.

Annual awards announced at the session included: Multisite Collaborator of the Year and Scientific Manuscript of the Year, both presented to Nikola Klein, MD, PhD, from Kaiser Permanente Northern California (Oakland, CA) for her work on vaccine safety research with colleagues from 6 other HCSRN sites;⁸ the Early Career Investigator Award, presented to Julie Richards, PhD, MPH, from Kaiser Permanente Washington (Seattle, WA); and Mentor of the Year, presented by grateful colleagues to Alanna Kulchak Rahm, PhD, MS, from Geisinger Health (Danville, PA). Best Poster Awards were presented on the final day to Cheryl Lefaiver PhD, RN, and colleagues from Advocate Aurora (Downers Grove, IL), and to Geoffrey Kahn, PhD, and Brian Ahmedani, PhD, of Henry Ford Health (Detroit, MI).

Despite a nearly 30-year network history, postconference evaluations confirm a substantial number of first- and second-time registrants attended the 2022 annual conference. Importantly, HCSRN values both the maturing of individual relationships within the network as well as the continued introduction of new colleagues and partners. To that end, HCSRN invites interested researchers and research team members to consider attending its 29th annual conference, to be held February 21–23, 2023, in Denver, Colorado. In the meantime, those who would like to learn more about HCSRN can visit the network's web pages at www.hcsr.org and/or contact existing members for additional insights.

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Abstracts accepted for presentation at HCSRN 2022 are available online at <https://institutionalrepository.aah.org/jpcrr/vol9/iss3/9/>