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Bottom-up approach to set research needs in healthcare

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Clinical research is a pivotal element for the Emilia-Romagna (Italy) healthcare system. Since 2004 the regional government has established “regional health research plans” that define priority research topics for the regional health system (RHS). Research on identified topics has been funded by periodic calls for public grants to support not for profit research carried out in regional public Hospitals and Local Health Trusts (LHTs). Until today, in Emilia-Romagna region, a top-down approach was used with regional decision-makers in identifying research themes to be investigated and funded. The goal of this intervention was to promote a bottom-up approach to identify research needs and survey research expectations from different stakeholders. To widely represent research needs and expectations, the research process involved not only decision-makers but also researchers, healthcare and social professionals, a citizens’ advisory committee. To enable every stakeholder to make a concrete contribution to the regional health research plan, innovative qualitative techniques such as focus group (FG) and Open Space Technology (OST) were used. Then, the material was analyzed by content analysis and a narrative synthesis of results was carried out. From January to December 2022, 160 regional stakeholders participated in 8 FGs and one OST. Research on health and social services emerged as the main ‘orphan’ area. Needs focused on the evaluation of services and factors affecting the quality of care, and on the development of new organizational models and research methods to assess organizational innovations. Research on interventions to improve community healthcare was indicated as an urgent need. The work highlights that the research on the organization of social and health services is one of the topic neglected. In particular the need to deepen the methodology and to study effective interventions to be implemented was expressed.

Key messages:

- Research on health and social services emerged as the main ‘orphan’ area.
- The work returns results on research needs from a broad sample of stakeholders to policymakers to direct regional funding for research.