

## Keynote presentation

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### THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER IN APPLIED HEALTH RESEARCH

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10.1136/bmjopen-2015-UCLSymposiumAbstracts.11

Qualitative research is widely used as a means of understanding and analysing a range of health and care issues. Qualitative researchers are a diverse group who use interpretive approaches to make the world visible (for instance, through case study, interviewing or participant observation). This makes them well-placed to study health care and to apply findings in practice and yet few describe themselves as doing ‘applied health research’. This raises the question as to whether applied qualitative health research is alive and kicking or whether, like the dog in the opening paragraph of Mark Haddon’s book<sup>a</sup>, it’s lying on its side with its eyes closed and seemingly dead? In seeking to answer that question, this paper focuses on current challenges facing qualitative researchers working in applied settings.

There is a vibrant community of qualitative researchers who are doing applied health research and who aspire to make a difference to people’s lives. High quality research is being undertaken that should not only make a difference but also raise the profile of qualitative health research. However, involvement in applied health research often involves compromises about the ways in which we work. It tends to involve multidisciplinary teams working together for short periods of time on specific problems in the real world, and it often requires researchers to work across disciplines and teams, proactively manage relationships, combine research methodologies and reconsider theoretical or

epistemological concerns. Those working in applied health research need to take care not to give up some of the important elements of qualitative research to the methodological hierarchy that mixed-methods designs sometimes presume in which quantitative methods are at the top and qualitative methods are relegated to a largely auxiliary role. They must ensure that methodological and disciplinary differences are confronted and addressed, rather than one subsuming or dominating the other. And they must ensure that theoretically-oriented work features strongly in applied health research: infusing research design, underpinning methodology and informing how data are analysed and interpreted.

Considerable progress has already been made in each of these areas. However, more could be done to ensure that when we do qualitative research we do it to the highest quality and are then confident in the value of our work. In doing so, we can then ensure that applied research is alive and kicking and with us for a long time to come.

<sup>a</sup>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, written by Mark Haddon and published by Vintage in 2004.