inside
VERSORGUNGS FORSCHUNG

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Series (Part 47): Department of Health Services Research at the Institute for Diversity Medicine at the Ruhr University Bochum

The perfect location for diversity-sensitive health services research

The Department of Health Services Research at Ruhr-Universität Bochum was newly established on 15 January 2025 with the appointment of Dr Ina Otte Dipl.-Soz. as Professor of Health Services Research. The department is based at the Institute of Diversity Medicine, which was established almost two years ago on 1 July 2023 and is unique in Germany. The reason: at the Institute of Diversity Medicine, together with Prof Marie von Lilienfeld-Toal's department (specialising in cancer medicine), research is being conducted into the influence of diversity factors (such as socio-economic or ethnic origin, gender, age, sexuality, etc.) on patient care.

>> One of the most important goals is to gain a deeper understanding and systematisation of medically relevant diversity factors in order to be able to treat people in an individualised and context-aware manner. The institute's 17 employees are not only focusing on singular factors such as gender, but also want to analyse and define which diversity factors play a relevant role in the medical context in a first step in order to be able to research their effects in a targeted manner in a second step. The interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary combination of biological and sociological dimensions as well as the possibility of an intersectional interweaving of the individual factors is of particular importance here. Professor Ina Otte: 'To this end, we always seek dialogue with patients and experience experts, involve patient associations and representatives in our research and also pay attention to diverse biographical backgrounds and life realities when staffing our team. In this way, we enable application- and reality-based research and help to promote science that benefits everyone. Close collaboration with clinically active colleagues is also essential for us, as this is the only way to ensure



Prof. Dr. sc. med. Ina Otte Dipl.-Soz. has held the Chair of Health Services Research at the Department of Health Services Research at the Institute for Diversity Medicine at Ruhr-Universität Bochum since January 2025. She is involved in the (further) development of participatory research concepts and the adaptation of empirical methods with the aim of making research more inclusive and diverse. Her other research interests include the identification of inappropriate care and the reduction of bias in clinical care settings as well as research questions that particularly concern the outpatient care of patients with neurodegenerative diseases or at the end of life.

Stations:
2004 to 2010: University of Bielefeld, studied sociology with a minor in social psychology 2010 to 2015: PhD in bioethics and medical ethics at the IBMB, University of Basel 2015 to 2020: Postdoc at the Department of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine, RUB 2020 to 2025: Junior Professor of Health Services Research at the Department of General Medicine, RUB

that we can make an effective contribution with our research in practice and ensure a successful transfer of practice and theory.'

Ina Otte wants her research to contribute to making medical care fairer. For a long time, medical studies were conducted with very homogeneous groups of participants: often male, white, educated, middle class. According to Otte, this leads to a lack of evidence-based data in the medical care of people who do not belong to this population group. In the worst-case scenario, this lack can even lead to incorrect diagnoses or incorrect treatment. 'In order to lay the foundation for health equality for all people, I am committed to ensuring that studies in healthcare research take more diverse groups of participants into account,' explains Ina Otte to 'Monitor Versorgungsforschung'. To this end, she and her team are working on new research concepts and are constantly asking themselves how different target groups can be reached: Where can they be contacted? What information do they need? How do we design studies to build trust and motivation to participate?

However, it is not only the inclusion of new groups of people that can be challenging - study designs and survey instruments that are designed in such a way that relevant characteristics that can influence care can be reliably surveyed are still being developed. Ina Otte's aim here is to use her expertise in qualitative and quantitative social research and medical ethics for the corresponding further and new concepts in order to be able to think and research care issues more fairly and inclusively in the future.

Already during her sociology studies at Bielefeld University, she was particularly interested in medical sociological issues. She was able to add medical ethics components to these during her doctorate in bioethics and medical ethics at the University of Basel. She focussed in particular on the topics of autonomy and self-determination, informed consent and consent processes.

Her research on these topics ultimately led her time and again to questions that are classically categorised as healthcare research: How can medical care be organised fairly so that all population groups have fair access to it and can benefit from it on an equal and self-determined basis?

Ina Otte explains that while working on these core questions of medical ethics, it has become increasingly clear to her that it is not only the information process that can be challenging for self-determined decisions - such as comprehensible language and a sufficient but not overwhelming amount of information - but that the person's biographical and socio-economic background also plays an immensely important role in the decision-making process.

In its day-to-day work, the Institute's team deals with context- and diversity-sensitive care issues in all areas of human medicine, taking a multi-perspective and interdisciplinary approach. To achieve this, the team brings together doctors, nurses, sociologists, health scientists and other disciplines from very different career levels to work together on the current challenges of diversity medicine in Germany.

Bochum as a city and the Ruhr region as a location offer an excellent research environment for all of these research questions. The Ruhr region is often described as a melting pot: Many different population groups live together in a compact area and many of them combine a wide variety of biographical and socio-economic backgrounds as well as different realities of life. Ina Otte: 'For someone like me, who is interested in the effects of individual and societal as well as biographical backgrounds on healthcare, this is the perfect scientific location. I am also very grateful to Ruhr-Universität Bochum and the Faculty of Medicine for their openness towards this research topic. Diversity is not only tolerated here, but actively lived and promoted.'

Although the Institute and the Department of Health Services Research have only been in existence for a short time, initial successes can already be reported. In addition to media presence, initial publications and active conference contributions, the institute is particularly pleased about the successful first Bochum Symposium on Diversity Medicine, which met with a great response last year. Preparations are currently underway to organise the Bochum Symposium on Diversity Medicine at RUB again this year.

In addition, a second annual symposium is being planned together with inno3 from 2026, which will be aimed at both the general population and healthcare professionals.

In addition, the first funding commitments followed this year - including for an extensive project funded by the G-BA's innovation fund: iDEM-Support. The aim of the project is to empower carers of people with dementia through a culturally adapted and expanded version of the World Health Organisation's e-health platform iSupport. The project started at the beginning of the year and, with funding totalling 1.4 million euros, is the first major research project of the new Department of Health Services Research.

Another milestone is the institute project 'acadim - Academy for Diversity and Individual Medicine'. As a university spin-off, acadim is pursuing the goal of establishing a non-profit platform for Germany-wide science transfer. The focus is on establishing a nationwide network for diversity-sensitive medicine as well as linking research and training. Acadim aims to bring the latest findings in diversity medicine to medical education and training for healthcare professionals and the general public. Ina Otte: 'In order to achieve these goals, we have already been able to establish initial collaborations - including with the German Society for Haematology and Medical Oncology - and of course we hope that many more collaborations will follow.' <<



Amelie Meibeck, M.A.,
research assistant

>> Why are you working/studying in the field of health services research at the Institute of Diversity Medicine?

I work in the Department of Health Services Research at the Institute of Diversity Medicine because, as a sociologist, I want to understand how social structures influence healthcare and how we can make it fairer. The interdisciplinary and practice-orientated research at the department creates the ideal framework for this: Diversity factors are analysed here in a differentiated way in order to design care in such a way that it is fair to all people, regardless of origin, social status or life situation.

What do you think characterises the field of health services research?

For me, the Department of Health Services Research at the Institute of Diversity Medicine is characterised above all by its interdisciplinary orientation and its focus on practical, socially relevant topics. I am particularly impressed by the close collaboration with patients and clinicians, which makes it possible to develop concrete solutions to challenges in healthcare and thus promote fairer and more sustainable care.

What topics and issues are you currently working on?

As part of the 'iDEM-Support' project funded by the Innovation Fund, I am currently focussing in particular on empowering carers of people with dementia. The aim of our project is to adapt the World Health Organisation's digital platform 'iSupport' to the German care context and expand it to include a module on digital health literacy. Our aim is to reduce the psychological burden on carers and improve the quality of care for people with dementia. en. <<



Maike Kömp M.Sc.,
research assistant

>> What would you personally like to achieve with healthcare research?

In healthcare research, I would like to use my sociological perspective to help shape fairer healthcare provision. I am driven by the desire to penetrate the social structures that determine access to health-related services and to find out how we can reduce systematic inequalities. I am particularly fascinated by the challenge of bringing about real change through innovative care concepts that benefit people facing particular health or social challenges.

Why do you work in the area of health services research at the Institute for Diversity Medicine?

I work in the Department of Health Services Research because I want to help identify and close research gaps, particularly in areas that have received little attention to date. As a health scientist, it is particularly important to me to reflect the diversity of life realities in my research and thus contribute to more inclusive healthcare. The combination of social relevance, scientific curiosity and the desire to initiate concrete changes makes this work particularly valuable to me.

In your opinion, what characterises the area of healthcare research at the Institute for Diversity Medicine at the Faculty of Medicine at Ruhr-Universität Bochum?

Our department is characterised by interdisciplinary cooperation at eye level, in which different professional perspectives are brought together. I find the close dialogue between colleagues particularly enriching. Together, we pursue the goal of sustainably improving health-related care. The focus is particularly on people whose perspectives are often overlooked in the healthcare system. We also address sensitive and controversial topics and scrutinise existing structures on the basis of empirical findings. Our aim is to think about healthcare in such a way that it reflects social diversity.

What topics and issues are you currently working on?

I am currently working on a project funded by the Innovation Fund to assess the quality of care for people with delirium in care facilities for the elderly. The focus is on the perspective of nursing staff and (general) practitioners with regard to their assessment of the quality of care and their perception of existing deficits. Another project, funded by the Faculty of Medicine's InnovationsFoRUM, is dedicated to the influence of cognitive thought patterns on the medical and nursing assessment and evaluation of acute and chronic pain in adult patients.

What would you personally like to achieve with healthcare research?

It is particularly important to me that the research creates concrete and applicable added value for practice. I would like to help bring the needs of marginalised groups more into focus and ensure that they are taken into account in healthcare provision as a matter of course. Healthcare research can help to make existing inequalities visible - and to change them. My personal goal is to ensure that all people - regardless of their personality traits or life realities - have equal access to high-quality care. <<