Off-campus study

It used to be that the majority of medical research took place in large academic centers. Although a great deal of work continues to be done in those settings, many health systems and insurers in the region now have their own research arms. Where once these entities might have existed solely to oversee safety and compliance for their organization’s clinical trials, in recent years many have expanded the scope of their work to include health systems delivery, comparative effectiveness and even population health studies. Researchers from these entities work independently on their own studies, collaborate with academic centers or join research networks. Increasingly, their findings are being published in peer-reviewed journals and presented at meetings. Here’s a look at what nine of these organizations are doing.

**Allina Health Division of Applied Research, Minneapolis**

*Year founded: 2008*

Research focus: Care delivery and population health. Areas of study include primary care, emergency services, critical care, end-of-life care, health care equity and community health. Studies involve Allina’s clinics and hospitals as well as its home care, community services and emergency services entities. Research efforts are designed to be instructive to other care delivery organizations, and results are published in peer-reviewed journals. Several research entities exist within Allina Health including the Virginia Piper Cancer Institute and Courage Kenny Research Center.

**Essentia Institute of Rural Health, Duluth**

*Year founded: 2010*

Research focus: Improving the patient experience, improving the health of the population, eliminating health disparities and reducing the cost of health care. Projects on primary care redesign, team delivery of behavioral health care, rural health care delivery and other topics may be initiated by investigators or at the request of Essentia Health. Clinical trials and translational research focuses on the prevention and treatment of cancer and heart and vascular disease. The institute has 116 active studies taking place.

**HealthEast Research, St. Paul**

*Year founded: 1994 (as HealthEast Medical Research Institute)*

Research focus: Improving service and patient care; drug and device trials. Recent projects include studies of diabetes care among acute-care patients, measures of excellence for care of patients with kidney stones and for home care after hospital discharge, and clinical trials of cardiology drugs and devices. Also maintains registries on specific patient populations that are used for study.

**HealthPartners Institute for Education and Research, Bloomington**

*Year founded: 1990. In 2012, HealthPartners Research Foundation and HealthPartners Institute for Medical Education were combined.*

Research focus: Chronic diseases, critical care, cancer care, child and maternal health, health economics, Alzheimer’s disease/neuroscience, mental health and oral health/dentistry. Types of studies conducted include behavioral intervention studies, survey-based studies, clinical trials, medical records research and basic science research. Many are initiated by institute staff or HealthPartners clinicians and involve HealthPartners clinics and Regions Hospital; investigators also work with research networks including the Midwest Research Network, Cardiovascular Research Network, Mental Health Research Network and HMO Research Network. More than 300 studies are underway at any given time, and institute research yields about 200 published articles a year.

**Medica Research Institute, Minneapolis**

*Year founded: 2010 (began operating in 2011)*

Research focus: The patient experience, the health of the community and care delivery. Current studies are looking into questions about ACOs and their impact on cost and quality; how health care can be delivered in an equitable fashion; emergency-department utilization patterns; consumer engagement and the role of health coaches; how social determinants of health affect the health experience and outcomes. Twenty-five papers have been published in peer-reviewed journals since 2012.
Minneapolis Medical Research Foundation (Hennepin County Medical Center), Minneapolis  
Year founded: 1952  
Research focus: Basic science research, clinical trials, outcomes studies, translational research in addiction, cancer, HIV/AIDS, aging, tobacco treatment and more. MMRF’s Berman Center is involved in evaluating treatments for conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease, stroke, neurological disorders, diabetes, breast cancer and osteoporosis. The center has participated in the NIH’s Women’s Health Initiative Observational Study, the ACCORD study on the relationship between type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease and the SHARP study assessing the effect of cholesterol-lowering medications on cardiovascular events in people with chronic kidney disease. MMRF’s Chronic Disease Research Group evaluates public health issues related to chronic illness and its treatment.

Olmsted Medical Center Research Department, Rochester  
Year founded: 1990  
Research focus: Advancing medical practice and supporting best practices and evidence-based care. Projects include translational research and implementation studies related to asthma, COPD, spirometry and postpartum depression; epidemiology studies on the prevalence, natural history and burden of chickenpox, irritable bowel syndrome, heart disease in women and chronic pain; clinical trials (eg, on therapies for black adults with asthma conducted in collaboration with Harvard); and screening studies (eg, evaluating school-based screening for scoliosis, COPD screening and asthma screening). Researchers receive funding from the NIH, CDC and AHRQ and have published more than 300 articles in peer-reviewed journals.

Park Nicollet Institute, St. Louis Park  
Year founded: 1959  
Research focus: Industry-sponsored and investigator-initiated studies to evaluate the safety and efficacy of medications, medical devices and procedures. Practice-based and health services research and quality-improvement projects to examine cost and value of care and patient-provider interactions. Areas of study include diabetes, oncology, cardiovascular health, Parkinson’s disease and orthopedics. Research is conducted throughout Park Nicollet’s primary care and specialty clinics and at Methodist Hospital and TRIA Orthopaedic Center. The institute was involved in 158 active studies in 2013.

Sanford Research, Fargo  
Year founded: 2006  
Research focus: Biomedical research with an emphasis on clinical and bench-to-bedside investigations. Areas of study include children’s health, type 1 diabetes, health outcomes and prevention, cancer biology, and genomic and molecular medicine.

Homegrown research network  
About three years ago, representatives from Minnesota’s key research institutions came together to determine how they could more effectively address some of the questions they were all trying to answer. The group formed the Midwest Research Network in order to do more robust (and better funded) studies together than they could on their own.

“We’re hoping it will be a great resource for investigators and stakeholders who want to bring forward key questions and issues where scientific rigor is necessary for assessment,” says Kristina Bloomquist, executive director of the Medica Research Institute and chair of the network’s steering committee.

Some members are already collaborating on projects. One group is looking at how to provide higher-quality, lower-cost care to Medicare beneficiaries at high risk for cardiovascular problems. Another is studying how to reduce hospital readmissions for patients with mental illnesses. Two others are involved in AHRQ-funded projects focused on empowering patients through public reporting and developing an infrastructure to investigate diversity in comparative effectiveness. In addition, the network has interest groups on mental health, aging, informatics and clinical-decision support.

Bloomquist says other states are taking note of the network and see it as an example to follow. “Minnesota is often referred to as the ‘Land of 10,000 Collaborations.’ We want to build on that legacy.”

The network’s members  
Allina Health  
Center for Chronic Disease Outcomes Research  
Children’s Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota  
Community Health Information Collaborative  
Essentia Institute of Rural Health  
Fairview Health Services  
HealthEast  
HealthPartners Institute for Education and Research  
Hennepin County Medical Center  
Institute for Clinical Systems Improvement  
Mayo Clinic  
Medica Research Institute  
Minnesota Community Health Worker Alliance  
Minnesota Community Measurement  
Minnesota Department of Health  
Minnesota Department of Human Services  
Park Nicollet Institute  
Stratis Health  
UCare  
University of Minnesota