What has palliative care research already achieved?

The following broad themes of research can be identified.

Prevalence of symptoms
Prevalence of pain and of other symptoms in patients with advanced incurable illness (cancer and non-cancer).

Pain control
Assessments of the efficacy of specific approaches to pain control and evaluation of pain control programmes [e.g. validation studies of the World Health Organization (WHO) method for pain relief].

Control of other symptoms
Assessments of the efficacy of other symptom control measures (e.g. for dyspnoea, nausea and vomiting).

Needs/experiences of patients
Assessments of the unmet psychological, social, spiritual, financial or other needs of patients.

Communication skills
Assessments of the communication skills of health professionals and the efficacy of educational programmes.

Studies of carers
Studies of the care provided to dying patients as perceived by bereaved relatives/carers and studies of the needs of carers themselves.

Conventional care
Studies documenting deficiencies in conventional care both in hospitals and in the community.

Place of death
Studies assessing the proportions of patients dying at home, in hospital and in hospices (including variations over time and according to social deprivation) and studies evaluating patients' preferences regarding place of death.

Bereavement
Studies following bereavement and the development of assessment tools to identify those at high risk of protracted grief.

Specialist palliative care services
Studies documenting the evolution of specialist palliative care services and some studies documenting the effectiveness of these services (e.g. measured in terms of symptom control and satisfaction with care).

Assessment tools
Some developments in the validation of quality of life measures for use in audit and research in palliative care settings.

Policy issues
Studies which identify the impact of key policy changes on the continued development of specialist palliative care services.

One of the features of successful research in palliative care is that it has involved a wide range of disciplines including psychiatrists, sociologists and epidemiologists, as well as those working directly within the specialty.