

Doctors' surgeries the ultimate disease data bank: academic

By Danielle Cronin
Health Reporter

GPs should stop complaining and take a leading role in the fight against chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes, ANU professor Chris van Weel said.

Family doctors were responsible for dealing with most of the population's health problems and should take a stronger role in research.

"What we need for these 90 per cent of the health problems [is to know] what is the best way of diagnosis and treatment.

"What is safe? What are the risky aspects of it? The only way to answer that is through research and the only place where you can study it is general practice."

Professor van Weel - a general practitioner from the Netherlands and specialist in chronic disease management - is a visiting fellow at the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute based at the Australian National University.

He becomes president of the World Organisation of Family Doctors in July.

Professor van Weel challenged GPs during a public lecture on achieving excellence in general practice.

He saw two avenues to boost general practitioners' involvement in research to prevent chronic disease and reduce the cost of health services.

Firstly, researchers needed access to patient data collected in family doctors' surgeries.

And secondly, GPs should be trained as researchers.

"If GPs are doing research in the prevention and treatment of illnesses their patients have, then I believe patients will have a better experience of the health system," he said.

GPs could be offered a range of incentives to take part.

They could include government payments to cover costs so this involvement did not affect their income.

"There's a large need for research in general practice and we have to prove our case - that's quite an exercise.

"Now you can say well 'no one likes us and we never get the grants'.

"General practice needs to stop complaining that nobody likes us.

"Rather, we should get on and take up a leadership role in reducing the potential for chronic illness to become a disastrous health issue."