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The contribution of general practice based research to the development of national policy: case studies from Ireland and Australia.

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BACKGROUND: This paper aims to describe the influence of general practice based research on the development of two specific policy initiatives, namely the Heartwatch Programme in Ireland and the Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care (BOiMHC) program in Australia. A case study approach was used to explore the extent to which relevant general practice based research shaped these initiatives. **RESULTS:** In both case studies, a range of factors beyond general practice based research shaped the initiative in question, including political will, the involvement of stakeholders (including key opinion leaders), and the historical context. Nonetheless, the research played an important role, and was not merely put to 'symbolic use' to support a position that had already been reached independently. Rather, both case studies provide examples of 'instrumental use': in the case of Heartwatch, the research was considered early in the piece; in the case of the BOiMHC program, it had a specific impact on the detail of the components of the initiative. **CONCLUSION:** General practice based research can influence policy-making and planning processes by strengthening the foundation of evidence upon which they draw. This influence will not occur in a vacuum, however, and general practice researchers can maximise the likelihood of their work being 'picked up' in policy if they consider the principles underpinning knowledge transfer.