

Meeting report

Addressing Global Child Health Challenges: The Rise of Multicentre Clinical Trials and Real-World Evidence in China



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Executive Summary	3
Opening Remarks	4
Part I: Keynotes	4
Cohort Studies: Design, History and Narratives	4
From Multicentre Clinical Research to Mixed-Method Design	5
Meaningful Multicentre Child Health Research	5
A New Era of Paediatric Clinical Research in China	6
Part II: Panel Discussions	6
Strengthening Multicentre Research Networks	6
Integrating Multicentre Clinical Trials and Real-World Evidence	7
Publishing Research with Global Impact	7
Challenges and Future Opportunities	8
Closing Reflections	9
Annex 1: Meeting Agenda	10
Annex 2: Forum Participants	11



Executive Summary

The BMJ Child Health Roundtable, Addressing Global Child Health Challenges: The Rise of Multicentre Clinical Trials and Real-World Evidence in China, brought together leading paediatric clinicians, researchers and journal editors from China, Australia, Sweden and the United Kingdom to discuss the future of paediatric clinical research and China's growing contribution to the global evidence available on child health. The meeting focused on strengthening multicentre clinical research, integrating real-world evidence (RWE) into paediatric research, and increasing the international impact of Chinese research.

Opening the meeting, Professor Shanti Raman highlighted the changing landscape of child health, noting that while infectious diseases remain an important concern, increasing attention must also be given to obesity, mental health, non-communicable diseases and the wider social determinants of health. She emphasised that these complex challenges cannot be addressed by individual countries alone and require greater international collaboration supported by high-quality evidence.

The keynote presentations explored how multicentre clinical research has evolved internationally and how China is increasingly well positioned to become a global leader in generating paediatric evidence. Professor Nick Brown reflected on the development of longitudinal cohort studies and demonstrated how robust research infrastructure has transformed child health research over the last several decades. Professor Tianyou Wang examined the current landscape of multicentre research in China, while Professor Wenhao Zhou described how National Children's Medical Centre-led research networks are supporting large-scale multicentre studies and real-world evidence generation. Professor Raman also shared international experience from Australia, emphasising that meaningful research begins with clinically important questions supported by rigorous methodology.

The panel discussion focused on four principal themes: strengthening multicentre research networks, integrating real-world evidence with clinical trials, increasing the international relevance of Chinese paediatric research, and developing the next generation of clinical researchers.

Participants agreed that multicentre collaboration should extend beyond increasing patient numbers to include harmonised study design, standardised data collection, shared governance and long-term partnerships between institutions. High-quality real-world evidence was recognised as an increasingly valuable complement to randomised controlled trials, particularly within paediatric intensive care, rare diseases and other clinical settings where conventional trials remain difficult to undertake.

Journal editors Professor Morris Gordon, Jane Godsland and Dr Yincen Tse provided practical guidance on publishing internationally, highlighting that methodological quality, transparency

and clinically important research questions remain considerably more influential than sample size alone. Throughout the discussion, speakers encouraged Chinese researchers to consider international relevance from the earliest stages of study design rather than viewing publication in English as the primary objective.

The meeting concluded that China has significant opportunities to become an increasingly influential contributor to global paediatric research through continued investment in multicentre collaboration, research infrastructure, data quality and international partnerships.



Opening Remarks

Welcoming delegates, Yuyan Kong, Managing Director of BMJ China, described the roundtable as part of BMJ's continuing commitment to bringing together international expertise to address some of the most pressing challenges in healthcare. She highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for collaboration between Chinese researchers and the wider international scientific community, noting that the meeting was intended not only to facilitate discussion but also to encourage future academic partnerships and collaborative research initiatives.

Professor Shanti Raman, Editor-in-Chief of BMJ Paediatrics Open, opened the scientific programme by reflecting on the rapidly changing landscape of child health. She observed that many of today's greatest challenges—including obesity, mental health disorders, health inequities and misinformation affecting vaccination and public health—are global in nature and require coordinated international responses. She argued that research from China will play an increasingly important role in shaping clinical practice and policies on child health worldwide.

Professor Raman also stressed that addressing these challenges depends upon strengthening collaboration across countries and disciplines. High-quality multicentre clinical research and robust real-world evidence will be essential in developing interventions capable of improving outcomes for children globally.



Part I: Keynotes

Cohort Studies: Design, History and Narratives

Professor Nick Brown, Editor-in-Chief of Archives of Disease in Childhood, opened the keynote session by examining the development of cohort studies and their continuing importance within paediatric research. Drawing upon examples including the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) study, the Millennium Cohort Study and Swedish national registries, he demonstrated how prospective cohort studies have transformed our understanding of child health over the last several decades.

Professor Brown explained that many paediatric research questions cannot be answered through randomised controlled trials because of ethical or practical limitations. Carefully designed observational cohort studies therefore provide an essential means of investigating important clinical questions while enabling researchers to examine long-term outcomes across large populations.

He emphasised that successful cohort studies rely upon robust study design, comprehensive data collection, effective participant follow-up and reliable data linkage. Looking ahead, he highlighted opportunities to incorporate environmental exposures, social determinants of health and longitudinal outcome data into future cohort studies, further strengthening their contribution to paediatric evidence generation.

From Multicentre Clinical Research to Mixed-Method Design

Professor Tianyou Wang discussed the development of multicentre paediatric research in China and the increasing importance of adopting mixed-method approaches capable of addressing complex clinical questions. While acknowledging the significant progress made in establishing multicentre collaborations, he argued that future research should move beyond simply expanding participant numbers towards integrating different forms of evidence capable of providing a more comprehensive understanding of clinical practice.

He emphasised that successful multicentre research requires consistent methodology, strong governance and effective collaboration between participating institutions. These foundations are essential for ensuring that evidence generated across multiple centres remains scientifically rigorous and clinically meaningful.

Meaningful Multicentre Child Health Research

Drawing on examples and lessons from Australia, Professor Shanti Raman explored what defines meaningful multicentre child health research. She emphasised that successful studies begin by identifying clinically important questions before selecting the most appropriate research methodology. International publication, she suggested, should be regarded as the outcome of conducting excellent research rather than the principal objective.

Professor Raman encouraged researchers to consider how study findings can influence clinical practice beyond their own institutions and healthcare systems. She highlighted the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration, patient-centred research and international partnerships in producing evidence capable of improving child health globally.

A New Era of Paediatric Clinical Research in China

Professor Wenhao Zhou concluded the keynote session by describing how China's National Children's Medical Centre network is supporting a new generation of multicentre clinical research. Through coordinated national collaboration and increasing use of real-world evidence, these initiatives are strengthening research capacity while generating evidence capable of informing healthcare across diverse patient populations.

Professor Zhou noted that continued investment in research infrastructure, integrated data systems and collaborative clinical networks will enable China to make increasingly significant contributions to global paediatric research.



Part II: Panel Discussions

Strengthening Multicentre Research Networks

Moderated by Professor Jinling Tang, the panel discussion began by exploring what is required to establish internationally competitive paediatric research networks in China. Professor Haitao Lv questioned whether internationalisation simply means publishing in English or whether it requires a fundamental change in the way research is conceived from the outset. Panellists agreed that genuine internationalisation begins long before manuscript preparation and requires researchers to identify clinically important questions with relevance beyond national borders.

Professor Jianhua Mao expanded on this by asking what defines a world-leading Chinese paediatric research network. Discussion highlighted that successful multicentre collaborations are built on shared objectives, standardised research protocols and long-term commitment between participating centres. Speakers agreed that simply increasing the number of collaborating hospitals is insufficient; sustainable partnerships require trust, effective governance and consistent methodological standards to ensure research quality.

Professor Wenhao Zhou reflected that China's National Children's Medical Centre network provides an important foundation for achieving these ambitions. By connecting leading paediatric centres across the country, national research platforms have begun to facilitate larger, more representative studies while improving consistency in research delivery. Participants viewed these developments as an important step towards establishing internationally recognised collaborative research programmes.

Professor Nick Brown reinforced this perspective by drawing on examples from across Europe. Longitudinal studies such as ALSPAC and the Millennium Cohort Study have remained influential for decades because they were established as long-term collaborative research platforms rather than isolated projects. He suggested that similar investment in sustainable

research infrastructure could significantly strengthen China's contribution to global child health research.

Integrating Multicentre Clinical Trials and Real-World Evidence

A major focus of the discussion concerned the relationship between multicentre clinical trials and real-world evidence (RWE). Professor Wei Xu asked what constitutes "high-quality integration" between these two approaches, particularly in paediatric intensive care and other rapidly evolving clinical settings where conducting conventional randomised controlled trials is often challenging.

Professor Morris Gordon explained that real-world evidence should be viewed as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, randomised controlled trials. While observational data can provide valuable insights into routine clinical practice, long-term outcomes and treatment effectiveness, convincing real-world studies remain dependent upon strong methodology, clearly defined research questions and transparent statistical analysis. Large datasets alone, he argued, are insufficient to produce reliable evidence.

Professor Linan Zeng discussed the particular importance of real-world evidence within paediatric therapeutics and rare disease research, where small patient populations and prolonged follow-up frequently make traditional clinical trials difficult. She suggested that carefully designed observational studies can provide invaluable information regarding long-term safety and effectiveness while complementing evidence generated through prospective trials. However, she cautioned that RWE cannot fully replace randomised studies where causal relationships or comparative treatment effectiveness need to be established.

Professor Enmei Liu highlighted the opportunities presented by China's rapidly expanding electronic medical record systems while emphasising the importance of maintaining patient privacy, methodological consistency and data quality. She argued that strengthening governance around routine clinical data will be essential if multicentre research is to realise its full potential. Participants agreed that high-quality data collection, harmonised outcome measures and transparent governance should underpin all future multicentre collaborations.

Publishing Research with Global Impact

The discussion then turned to the international dissemination of Chinese paediatric research. Professor Haitao Lv reiterated that publishing in English should not be viewed as the primary goal of internationalisation. Instead, researchers should begin by asking questions that are relevant to clinicians worldwide and designing studies capable of addressing global evidence gaps.

Speaking from the perspective of international journal editors, Professor Morris Gordon noted that manuscripts are rarely judged by sample size alone. Editors instead prioritise studies with

clear hypotheses, robust methodology, appropriate statistical analysis and findings that make a meaningful contribution to clinical practice.

Dr Vincent Tse encouraged researchers to consider international relevance before writing even begins. He suggested that investigators should ask why clinicians outside China would find the research important and whether the study addresses challenges encountered across different healthcare systems. Research framed around globally relevant clinical questions is considerably more likely to resonate with editors and reviewers.

Jane Godsland emphasised the importance of transparent reporting and adherence to internationally recognised reporting guidelines. Clear methodology, comprehensive reporting and openness regarding study limitations all contribute significantly to editorial decision-making. She noted that many strong studies fail not because of poor science but because the wider importance of the work is not communicated effectively.

Professor Chundi Xu built upon these observations by asking what characteristics enable a study from China to be recognised as globally significant. Panellists agreed that internationally influential research is defined by the importance of the question being addressed rather than the geographical location of the study. Robust methodology, transparent reporting and clinically meaningful findings remain universal markers of high-quality research.

Professor Wei Xiang concluded this section by asking what advice should be offered to the next generation of Chinese paediatric researchers. Speakers consistently encouraged young investigators to focus on important clinical questions, collaborate widely, involve experienced methodologists early and view publication as the natural outcome of conducting excellent research rather than the primary objective.



Challenges and Future Opportunities

Professor Yufeng Liu concluded the panel by asking participants to reflect on the practical barriers to conducting multicentre paediatric research in China. The discussion highlighted several continuing challenges, including variation in ethical approval processes, differences in data standards, funding limitations, investigator collaboration and maintaining long-term patient follow-up.

Despite these challenges, the discussion remained overwhelmingly optimistic. Participants agreed that China possesses many of the essential components required to become a global leader in paediatric clinical research, including extensive healthcare infrastructure, large patient populations and increasing investment in research capability. Continued development of integrated clinical databases, national research networks and international collaborations will

further strengthen China's ability to generate evidence capable of informing paediatric practice worldwide.

Looking ahead, speakers also recognised the growing potential of artificial intelligence, advanced analytics and integrated digital health systems to support multicentre research. However, technological innovation was consistently viewed as an enabler rather than a substitute for rigorous methodology. High-quality research will continue to depend upon asking meaningful clinical questions, applying appropriate study designs and maintaining the highest standards of scientific integrity.



Closing Reflections

Closing the meeting, Professor Shanti Raman reflected on the strong consensus that had emerged throughout the afternoon. While child health challenges continue to evolve, participants agreed that collaboration, methodological excellence and international partnership will be fundamental to improving outcomes for children worldwide.

Yuyan Kong thanked the speakers and delegates for their contributions and reiterated BMJ China's commitment to supporting continued collaboration between Chinese researchers and the international child health community. She expressed the hope that the roundtable would serve not only as a platform for discussion but also as the beginning of new research partnerships, joint publications and future academic exchange.

The meeting concluded with a shared recognition that China is entering an important new phase of paediatric clinical research. Through continued investment in multicentre collaboration, high-quality real-world evidence and internationally relevant research, Chinese investigators are well positioned to make an increasingly significant contribution to advancing child health globally.

Annex 1: Meeting Agenda

Time (GMT+8)	Agenda	Speakers/Panelists	Moderator
15:00-15:10	Opening Remarks	Shanti Raman	Yuyan KONG
15:10-15:25	Keynote Speeches	1. Cohort studies: design history and narratives Nick Brown	Shanti Raman
15:25-15:40		2. From multicentre clinical research to multi-method design: status quo and challenges Tianyou WANG	
15:40-15:55		3. Meaningful multicentre clinical research on child Health: Australian experiences & considerations and publishing strategies for international medical journals Shanti Raman	
15:55-16:10		4. A New Era of Pediatric Clinical Research in China: National Children's Medical Center-Driven Multi-Center and Real-World Studies Wenhao ZHOU	
16:10-16:50	Panel Discussion	Multi-Methodological Integration of Multicentre Clinical Research and Real-World Evidence: Achieving Successful Dissemination and Internationalisation Tianyou WANG, Haitao LV, Wenhao ZHOU, Jianhua MAO, Wei XU, Enmei LIU, Jie WU, Wei XIANG, Chundi XU, Yufeng LIU, Linan Zeng, Morris Gordon, Yincen Tse, Jane Godslan	Jinling TANG
16:50-17:00	Closing Remarks	Representative of Guangzhou Woman and Children's Medical Center Shanti Raman	Yuyan KONG

Annex 2: Forum Participants

Name	Role/Affiliation
Chundi Xu	Director of the Clinical Research Center for Inflammatory Bowel Disease, School of Pediatrics, Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine
Enmei Liu	Vice President, Chongqing Medical University
Haitao Lv	Party Secretary and President, Children's Hospital of Soochow University
Jane Goddard	Head of Publishing Programmes, BMJ Group (was the founding Editor in Chief of The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health)
Jianhua Mao	President, The Children's Hospital, Zhejiang University School of Medicine
Jie Wu	Director of the Department of Gastroenterology, Beijing Children's Hospital, Capital Medical University
Jinling Tang	Chair Professor, Shenzhen University of Advanced Technology
Linan Zeng	Director of the Department of Pharmacy, West China Second University Hospital, Sichuan University; Associate Editor, BMJ Paediatrics Open
Morris Gordon	Professor of Evidence Synthesis and Systematic Review, University of Central Lancashire, UK; Deputy Editor, BMJ Paediatrics Open
Nick Brown	Associate Professor, Department of Women's and Children's Health, Uppsala University, Sweden; Editor-in-Chief, Archives of Disease in Childhood
Shanti Raman	Director of Community Paediatrics - South Western Sydney; Editor-in-Chief, BMJ Paediatrics Open
Tianyou Wang	Honorary Director of the Hematology and Oncology Center, Beijing Children's Hospital, Capital Medical University
Wei Xiang	Chief Pediatric Expert, Hainan Women and Children's Medical Center
Wei Xu	Vice President, Shengjing Hospital of China Medical University
Wenhao Zhou	President, Guangzhou Women and Children's Medical Center
Yincent Tse	Paediatric Nephrologist, The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, UK; Social Media Editor, Archives of Disease in Childhood
Yufeng Liu	Director, Institute of Pediatric Hematology and Oncology, Zhengzhou University
Yuyan Kong	Managing Director, BMJ China