

Developing researchers

Nurse managers have a role to play in helping nurses become involved in clinical research, says Elizabeth Girot

OVER THE PAST 15 years, evidence-based practice has had a significant effect on the nursing profession.

The importance of evidence-based practice is not disputed and, although research is only one facet of evidence-based practice, it is important that nurses understand it and are equipped to appraise it critically to support their practice.

Traditionally, however, nurses have not been in a strong position to involve themselves in research, and there is still much debate about whether they should be actively involved in it now.

Nevertheless, the Department of Health's (DH) (2006) strategic

direction for the NHS focuses on applied research, supporting the delivery of public services, integrating research into practice and placing patients at the centre of the research.

Unique collaboration

With almost 700,000 registered nurses in the UK, nurses are well placed to make a unique contribution to research in the NHS.

Yet, until the 1990s, most nurses in training had little or no exposure to research. Even now, hands-on experience of empirical studies in education programmes is restricted, mainly due to NHS research governance constraints.

Many nurses are seconded to research teams in NHS trusts but, for most practising nurses, the pursuit of a career as a nurse researcher can involve financially prohibitive contractual arrangements.

Nurses who pursue careers in education find that achievements in scholarship and research are expected of them; such expectations are part of university culture.

In spite of the difficulties involved in balancing their teaching, research and practice roles, nurse academics have become increasingly willing to engage with the demands of research and embed it into the culture of their departments.



A study of research careers was undertaken recently in four universities in south west England (Rosser 2007). This study found that nursing and midwifery academics expressed enthusiasm for their research achievements over the past five years, and wanted to sustain and develop them further.

However, many of them also found that, as they develop their teaching skills and move away from their clinical roots, their attention turns towards pedagogical research

role, although, to date, no funds have been released. Meanwhile, an increasing number of nurses are being educated to doctoral level (UKCRC 2007), which indicates that further opportunities to combine education and practice in research activity will arise.

Innovative projects

In south west England, there are already several innovative projects that promote collaboration between education and practice in place.

Clinical research encourages true collaboration. It creates opportunities for strategic alliances to be developed for the good of patients.

Nurse managers have a key role to play in forming these alliances by identifying common purposes of such partnerships and encouraging mutual respect between them.

But the most important role that nurse managers can play in encouraging clinical research is to identify pertinent research questions and become involved closely in research that will make a genuine improvement to patients' lives **nm**

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and they then begin to lose touch with their clinical networks.

To achieve their goals therefore, clinical nurses and academics must be brought together so that the contributions of each is valued and respected by the other.

Career opportunities

Flexible and joint career opportunities for clinical nurses and academics have already been developed in both practice and education.

Lecturer-practitioner, practice educator and academic in practice roles have been introduced to encourage the integration of theory and practice, and are particularly useful to individuals who have yet to register as nurses.

More recently, the UK Clinical Research Collaboration (UKCRC 2007) signalled its support for the new clinical academic role for nurses. By taking up this role, nurses can develop their research skills and begin a career in research.

The UKCRC also suggested that ongoing education and contractual support should be provided for the

Some clinical nurse managers have invested heavily in collaborative partnerships with their local universities, including two trusts that employ a part time nurse academic to work in identified research projects.

These nurse academics support clinical nurses in their research endeavours, which motivates them and prevents them from dropping out of their already costly post-registration programmes.

The introduction of this and other, similar secondments ensure that support for research in practice can bring diverse teams together to compete for research grants.

In spite of budgetary constraints there is also a willingness to support joint roles at the highest level.

In one part of the south west region there is a willingness to support joint roles at the highest level by, for example, developing clinical chairs and clinical readers that are funded jointly by NHS trusts and universities.

At this strategic level, clinical research would be on the agenda of key decision-making committees.

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