

The role of the research nurse

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Although this article draws on the UK experience of the author and may not be of immediate application to South Sudan, the principles of Research Nursing can be adapted to developing countries. In time some South Sudanese nurses may want to be involved in research.

This article explains what research is and why it is so important to health care. It briefly discusses how to set up a trial and the role of the Research Nurse based on my own experience.

What is research?

Research is vital in health care to support current practice and to inform better approaches and improve patient outcomes. "It helps us to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent health problems"[1]. Research can take many forms, such as testing a new drug, looking at different interventions and testing a theory. Clifford & Gough [2] say that "while there are multiple definitions of research, they share common themes - the two most obvious being:

1. A search for knowledge - and that it does so
2. In a systematic and scientific fashion."

Most nurses apply a problem-solving approach to their practice - the knowledge they use is often a combination of tradition, ritual, experience and authority.

A clinical trial refers to studies that test the effectiveness of a clinical treatment [3]; these can be in relation to a drug or medical research. Often the participants are healthy or have a specific medical condition. The trials vary in size from a small pilot study in one locality to multiple sites internationally.

Setting up a trial is a lengthy process that requires input from many different people before it can reach the hospital or area where the research is to take place. These people include statisticians, sponsors and chief investigators. When the research question and the design of the study have been agreed, a protocol (the action plan of the study) is written. When feasibility and funding have been established, the protocol needs ethics approval and in some cases approval by government or other authorities.

Role of the Research Nurse

The role of the Research Nurse in setting up a trial varies from place to place. Preferably the nurse has at least two years of general nursing experience and a degree in nursing.

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The nurse usually works with the Principle Investigator (PI) who holds overall responsibility for running the trial.

The role includes screening and recruiting patients for the trial, gaining informed consent from the patient or carer if the patient lacks mental capacity (as defined by the Mental Capacity Act 2005 [4]), communicating with the coordinating centre, reporting adverse events, recording data and educating staff. These roles are conducted whilst adhering to the trial protocol and the 1996 International Conference on Harmonisation (ICH) and Good Clinical Practice (GCP) standards for research [5].

My own experience

I became a Research Nurse when, after working in the community for some years, I was looking for a new challenge. I am employed by the hospital but partly funded by the South East Stroke Research Network (SESARN). The network is one of ten which facilitate stroke research in UK.

I had not worked in research before and the first 6 weeks were a huge learning curve. I had to attend several courses which included a research course. I have spent time with another Research Nurse and regularly attend Network meetings. These meetings include education sessions and opportunities to share ideas with the other research staff. I have been very fortunate to work with a very supportive PI (Dr Eluzai Hakim) and Research Manager.

A successful research nurse needs a PI who is keen and supportive, to be able to communicate well at all levels and to work both alone and as part of a team, and to be empathetic to the needs of both the patients and relatives.

References

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