

The front line research workforce: career development and support needs



Overview

The last decade has seen a rapid increase in the number of health professionals employed to deliver clinical research.

Nurses are by far the largest group; though other health professionals such as dietitians, physiotherapists and radiographers are also employed where their particular clinical skills are required. They play an important role in research, but relatively little attention to date has been paid to their needs and experiences.

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Project Aims and Methods

The aim of the study was to provide a better understanding of the work experience, career aspirations and training needs of research nurses, midwives and allied health professionals (AHPs) working in Oxford and the Thames Valley, in order to inform the planning and provision of high quality, innovative and relevant education, training and career development support.

We achieved a
60%
response rate

A mixed methods, cross-sectional study design was adopted. Data were collected using an online questionnaire which included both fixed choice and open-ended questions (168 responses; response rate 60%), and focus groups in each of the three counties in the Thames Valley. To facilitate comparisons across different institutional contexts, recruiting sites were combined into three broader groups: the OUHTPlus (65% of total sample), comprising the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust, Oxford BRC, and Oxford MSK BRU; Other Hospitals (21%), comprising other NHS Hospital Trusts in the Thames Valley; and Community (14%), comprising NHS Community Trusts and individual general practices.

Findings

Participants fulfilled a range of recruitment and data collection responsibilities with a minority also reporting managerial and/or academic responsibilities. Only a minority found meeting targets for recruitment, keeping up to date with data entry, and gaining the co-operation of ward or practice staff easy. Only a minority of those who were involved in writing up research results found it rewarding and few found developing their own research project easy.

In terms of what they most enjoyed, participants identified a range of intrinsic rewards, and rewards deriving from their relationships with participants and research colleagues; flexible hours and the autonomy and control they exercised in carrying out their responsibilities; and opportunities to gain new knowledge, skills and responsibilities.

In terms of what changes they would most like to see, almost half wanted to see a better match between their workload and the resources available to fulfil it; better engagement in research by clinicians; better office facilities and more support for professional development and career progression. Alongside their accounts of the rewards of their role, they also described their view that what they did was not recognised or valued by others they worked with, and the sense of injustice this generated.

Most participants expected to continue working in research for the foreseeable future, though most had worked in their current post for two years or less; and in all their research posts together for between one and six years only. Many had ambitions to develop their skills to a high standard, and were frustrated by the lack of a career structure and limits to career progression within the 'delivery' side of clinical research.

Only a minority found meeting targets for recruitment easy

Recommendations

The responsibilities of research nurses, midwives and AHPs are diverse and wide-ranging as are the types of studies on which they work. Any approach to addressing their education, training and professional development needs must take this into account. As well as funding individuals to attend external courses, further training could be provided by local NHS Trusts and NIHR organisations. There is also a case for identifying courses at accredited institutions, leading to a recognised qualification, for those who would like to develop a career within research nursing. This would provide recognised credentials for career progression and, together with a distinct career pathway within the 'delivery' side of research, would help to create a stronger professional identity for this group of researchers.

Working with Thames Valley Health Knowledge Team

This project was carried out by Professor Mary Boulton, Oxford Brookes University, and builds on earlier work in 2012. This phase was funded by NIHR Oxford Biomedical Research Centre and Thames Valley NIHR Clinical Research Network. The Knowledge Team was involved in the inception of the project and provided support through the two phases of research activity.

Thames Valley Health Knowledge Team
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