

THE IMPORTANCE OF NURSES IN HEALTH RESEARCH- A HOLISTIC APPROACH

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The need for members of all health professions, including nursing, to understand and apply research to their own practice is widely acknowledged. Furthermore, the need to encourage and support nurses to undertake research and contribute meaningfully to our understanding of health issues has also been emphasised by associations such as the International Council of Nurses (ICN 2007)*. However, illness and health are multifactorial and often complex in nature; problems are rarely confined to one particular discipline or profession. Therefore, researchers need to adopt a wide-ranging perspective that considers a broad range of personal, biological, psychological and social factors that may contribute to ill health. In this way, a growing awareness of the benefit of bringing together a range of disciplines in order to tackle complex health problems has led to an increasingly holistic, interdisciplinary approach being fostered and used in health research.

A successful interdisciplinary team is more than the sum of its individual parts; it combines a robust network of academic researchers, scientists and clinicians who possess a coordinated range of skills, expertise and experience. Conducting interdisciplinary research can be challenging, but it encourages individuals to broaden their own professional boundaries, collaborate across disciplines, and so bring together a comprehensive and unique range of viewpoints and capabilities to tackle complex health problems. Nurses are a fundamental part of the healthcare workforce and should play a key role in contributing to interdisciplinary health research.

Numerous initiatives have been implemented over the past decade in the UK to promote the importance of high quality clinical research within the National Health Service. As a result, there has been a substantial rise in the number of nurses employed in the field of clinical research. Clinical research nurses are pivotal members of a multidisciplinary research team; they possess a wide range of key proficiencies such as the ability to work autonomously; carry out highly skilled practical tasks; communicate effectively with both team members and study participants and their families; accurately complete study documentation; and adhere to research legislation and guidelines. Essentially, however, the role is a supportive one, enabling the research of others (often from health professions other than nursing), as distinct from a truly interdisciplinary researcher. However, clinical research can provide an ideal foundation upon which nurses might develop their own research ideas and progress their research career.

My own career began as a clinical research nurse in an asthma and allergy department. Keen to pursue my own research questions, I initially undertook a PhD investigating the effects of air pollution on asthmatic symptoms among school children. Throughout my postgraduate studies, I received considerable supervision and support from a diverse range of disciplines including epidemiology, nursing, medicine, physics, psychology, statistics, geography, and education. This became a springboard to an academic career as part of an interdisciplinary team. One of the research challenges in which I am currently involved concerns how we might best adapt to the needs and challenges of an ageing global population. The team comprises a range of experts from fields including biomedical engineering, epidemiology, health economics, nursing, medicine, nutrition, occupational therapy, psychology, and statistics.

Recently, structured academic training schemes have been established, primarily in the clinical setting, to provide opportunities for nurses in the UK to pursue a career pathway in research. Efforts have also focussed on improved awareness among undergraduate nurses of the wealth of career possibilities that exist in health research. However, these promising initiatives need to be built upon

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*International Council of Nurses (2007) ICN Policy on Nursing Research www.icn.ch/images/stories/documents/publications/position_statements/BO5_Nsg_Research.pdf

in order to consolidate research capacity in nursing in the future. It is vital to develop strategies for nurturing the role of the nurse and recognising the valuable role that the profession can play within an interdisciplinary team in solving complex health problems.