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Article:

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(2016) *Your path to research*. *Nursing Standard*, 30 (34). p. 63. ISSN 0029-6570

<https://doi.org/10.7748/ns.30.34.63.s49>

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Nursing Standard

Research in Child Health – a career pathway for every children’s nurse?

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Over the last 20 years we have witnessed a huge growth in published research specifically exploring children and young peoples (CYP), and families perspectives of living with disease, family led care in the home, complex nursing interventions and the way health service are delivery to meet the needs of CYP and families. Much of this research is being undertaken, promoted and adopted by children’s nurses. Research into the health and well-being of CYP and their families adds a perspective to evidence based practice not usually found in clinically based research. This population have specific and evolving health care needs and unique experiences because of: a decline in the incidence and outcome of previously fatal communicable infectious diseases and a shift in care focus to supporting CYP with long-term conditions; technological advances have resulted in growing numbers of CYP living longer with complex needs; on-going influences of growth and development and shifting stages of dependence and independence; and multiple family dynamics. Therefore, it is not appropriate to apply the findings of research undertaken with adult patients to CYP and their families.

Along with this growth in CYP focused research the way we undertake research with this population must be flexible, dynamic and continually evolving. CYP, including pre school children, can be involved as active research participants but require specific research methods to collect data relevant to their cognitive development. In addition, CYP and their parents/carers should be offered the opportunity through patient and public involvement initiatives to be involved across all stages of the research process, which may include being co-researchers. Involving CYP and their parents/carers in research is evolving and exciting; with the potential that research meets CYP needs. However, children’s nurses must develop the competencies and skills to collaborate and engage with CYP and families: a process that must begin with student nurses.

Research with CYP and families is not without its challenges. Much of the research undertaken by children’s nurses and academics is focused on exploring issues through qualitative research. Qualitative research resonates with nurses in particular because we are trained and specialise in the psychosocial elements of care as well as clinical needs. However, increasingly we are using multiple or mixed research methods, which are particularly useful in the development of complex interventions that aim to improve practice. However, in a healthcare environment with increasing economic pressure the impact, and effectiveness of interventions, must be demonstrated including how they make a clinical difference and impact on patient centred outcomes.

Undertaking robust research and basing practice on the best available evidence, is everyone’s responsibility. The careers pathway for children’s nurses to combine research, clinical practice and teaching are limited, often a choice has to be made between working primarily in a clinical or academic setting, and unlike medicine there are few clinical professors with joint practice/ university appointments. This can be challenging for the aspiring nurse research; health care settings lack research support for nurse developing their own programme of research and in higher education institutions there is lack of opportunity to remain active in practice. There are opportunities for children’s nurse to develop a research career through roles such as a clinical research nurse to support research studies as part of clinical research networks or as part of funded research projects. Other options are to undertake MPhil, Clinical Research Masters or PhD. A PhD will enable you to

develop your research skills through training, and explore an area of practice in depth. This may enable you to pursue a career as a lecturer/researcher using your research and practice skills to support under-graduate and post-graduate nurses in the development of their research knowledge underpinning practice. We need effective links between academia and practice to ensure these pathways to research are stronger in order to maintain and indeed enhance research in CYP health.

For any children's nurse considering research as a career building effective networks is a great place to start: find out who is undertaking research with CYP and families in your local area, and locate and join existing networks and forums. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Research in Child Health (RiCH) community was launched in June 1997 as a network for all children's nurses interested in or wanting to share research activity and enhance the evidence-based practice for infants, children and young people and their families. RiCH operates through a national steering group that provides strategic direction and regional groups across the UK that act as a local network with regional co-ordinators link with the steering group. Now well into its 2nd decade, the purpose of RiCH has remained the same, to:

- Encourage networking of research activity between nurses working with infants, children and young people and their families through a steering group and a number of regional groups across the UK;
- Enhance evidence-based practice not only locally and nationally but also internationally.

Some of the achievement and activities of RiCH include:

- Contribute (through its members and supporting students and staff) to the network pages of Nursing Children and Young People;
- Support practitioners to develop their research ideas, and publish findings;
- Develop partnerships between practitioners and academics, through RiCH networking events;
- Produced a route map to support practitioners undertaking qualitative research with children and young people
https://www2.rcn.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/451101/Planning_a_New_Qual_Study_with_CYP_and_Families_12May.pdf

An example of the partnership development is the Nursing Children and Young People annual award, where RiCH members support children's nurses to disseminate their research. Every year we offer two awards of £750 each for children's nursing students, research students and/or qualified children's nurses (any grade) to attend an RCN conference and present their research project or literature review. This year Fiona McGregor a Reproductive sexual health nurse and full time PhD student was successful in her application for one of the awards, her project focussed on *'Improving the sexual health of homeless young people resident in hostels'*.

We are passionate about research, and improving the care for CYP and their families. Although undertaking research is challenging it is immensely rewarding both personally and professionally.