”It is both vital and feasible to balance practice and research”

A
fter decades of nursing I have found myself in the fortunate position of studying for a PhD while working as a staff nurse. The emerging hybrid role is one of a clinical academic nurse aspiring to embed evidence into practice. Traditionally much of what happens in the clinical area can fall below the radar of knowledge, so unseen events in the real world become distanced from academic knowledge. Clinical academic roles can bridge the gap between theory and practice. However, this new concept of synthesising traditional roles and research may, in the current climate, be seen by some as superfluous to requirements. In times of increased pressure, there is a need for “all hands on deck” to keep the service running, with the danger that research is seen as time consuming and subsequently viewed with suspicion and of limited value.

On one hand, we are ideally placed as experienced clinicians who are embedded into teams and the workplace culture with an in-depth understanding of current issues; on the other, we are training to be researchers, well versed in methodology, philosophy of science and current specialist literature. This multifaceted perspective hints at the promise of accelerating change. However, problems can exist. For instance, I have designed a manual to facilitate collaborative working with volunteers, which I have just presented to nutrition link nurses. I intend to continue this work by researching it as a PhD. As I am in the design stage, I became aware that pursuing the dissemination of my project could affect future data collection. This raises an important point: where do I stand on the continuum of clinician and researcher? In the rush to implement findings to improve patient care as a nurse, am I jeopardising future findings as a researcher? What are the ethical implications? At second glance, having a “foot in both camps” does not seem as simple – or even as advantageous – as I first thought.

Having reflected and taken advice, I now realise it is important to stop and pursue further research to validate my original work. This will ensure the finished product will be developed from a stronger evidence base and is, therefore, more robust. I may even learn more lessons or discover an entirely new perspective, which will challenge the original findings, thereby leading me to a better version of the original.

It is important that nurses develop clinical academic careers and are involved in design, planning, dissemination and implementation of research. “Impact” has become the new buzzword with demands to demonstrate change in practice resulting from research. In the rush to find answers we may discover even more questions. But, despite the challenges involved in developing new nurse roles, we can be confident that by being involved in research and clinical roles, we can accelerate the journey towards producing relevant, insightful research that will improve treatment and healthcare, and so facilitate delivering the best possible care.

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