Nursing must overcome barriers to vital research

EXCLUSIVE Steve Ford
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Workforce pressures, education structures and negative perceptions are all holding back nurse involvement in vital research and innovation that could benefit patient care.

Nearly two-thirds of nurses believe there is insufficient opportunity to build a career in clinical research, with lack of time and information cited as the major barriers to involvement, a Nursing Times survey has revealed. In contrast to the perceived challenges, however, respondents indicated a desire among the profession to get more involved in research and further develop their ideas for best practice.

Of around 650 respondents, 98% said nurse-led research or research by nurses was “vital” or “important” to furthering their best practice. In addition, 68% said they were either “very” or “fairly interested” in a career that involved research, and nearly half said they had considered conducting their own clinical research.

Three-quarters said they would be interested in finding out more about opportunities to get involved in clinical research – but 63% told Nursing Times they did not think there were enough opportunities for nurses to develop a career in the field.

When asked about the biggest barriers to nurses becoming involved in clinical research, 40% of nurses cited a lack of time, 17% said there was a lack of information on opportunities, and 11% a lack of staff cover.

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Meanwhile, other nurses noted a lack of encouragement from managers or, in some cases, even active discouragement. “There are limited opportunities or encouragement within organisations due to current austerity and political changes within the NHS,” said one.

Unfortunately, the survey also indicated that historical perceptions about the hierarchy between the nursing and medical professions held true for research. Nearly three-quarters felt that nursing research was perceived as less important than studies by doctors, although 23% thought the two were viewed with the same level of importance.

One nurse said “medical research steals the limelight, leaving nursing in the wings”. Another said nursing needed to have a “similar set-up” to medicine, in terms of being able to select research “as an active part of their career”.

The survey, conducted with the National Institute for Health Research and Health Education England, also asked nurses about their experience of being involved in studies and trials. The majority, 61%, had not been involved in clinical research, 40% of nurses cited a lack of time, 17% said there was a lack of information on opportunities, and 11% a lack of staff cover.

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emphasis in nurse education on developing decision-making skills and the routine application of research and innovation.

The report noted that increasing numbers of nurses were engaging with research and seeking to implement study findings to underpin their daily work. But it cautioned that it was “not seen as the norm”, stating that the ability to “research, engage in critical inquiry and implement research findings that imbue everyday practice is imperative”.

The NIHR and HEE will now use the insights revealed by the survey to inform their programmes to develop nursing research.

Professor Lisa Bayliss-Pratt, HEE’s director of nursing and deputy director of education and quality, said: “The research undertaken by Nursing Times stresses the importance of nursing professionals having the opportunity and support to pursue a clinical academic career.

“We are pushing on an open door as three-quarters of people surveyed said they wanted to find out more about opportunities to get involved with research but raised concerns about the opportunities for nurses to develop a career in clinical research,” she said.

“We need to ask ourselves about what else we can do as part of our work to promote clinical academic careers and open up opportunities for nurses to be involved in research,” she added.

She told Nursing Times that, over the next few months, HEE would be working with nurses to help understand the factors that “enable and inhibit career progression for those who wish research to be an integral aspect of their chosen career path”.

In addition, HEE and the NIHR have set up the Integrated Clinical Academic programme to provide a pathway for nurses to develop a clinical academic career. The programme for non-medical health professionals started in 2015 and is due to open for its next round of applications this month. It provides opportunities to undertake fully funded clinical research and relevant training while maintaining clinical practice and a salary.

Professor Dave Jones, dean of NIHR faculty trainees, welcomed the “real interest” in nursing research that was revealed by the survey. He said: “We are hugely committed to developing research opportunities for the nursing workforce.”

But he noted several “learning points” from the survey – namely on increasing “awareness of the opportunities to get involved” at an individual level and boosting “organisational buy-in” among those trusts facing workforce and financial pressures.