

# Addressing “research-phobia” among nurses in the clinical area

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Nursing literature indicates that the involvement of nurses in research has the potential to inform practice, improve quality care, and enhance positive patient outcomes, but the number of nurses engaging in research appears low. This deficit involves conducting and utilising research which may be associated with limited or lack of research knowledge, training, funding, incentives and poor motivation for nurses to conduct research. Although there is a growing demand for nurses in the clinical service areas to conduct research independently and collaboratively, many nurses find it difficult to start the process. In this article, we suggest ways by which nurses working in the clinical service area can start to plan to become actively engaged in research.

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## Why should nurses conduct research?

In order to ensure delivery of appropriate and safe nursing care, nurses must initiate, conduct and utilise research as scientific evidence to further the practice and delivery of effective, appropriate and safe nursing care.<sup>1</sup> Research, being the bedrock of excellent nursing care, has always provided the basis upon which to guide and evaluate clinical practice.<sup>2</sup> Nursing literature indicates that the involvement of nurses in research has the potential to inform practice and improve patient care, but the number of nurses engaging in research appears low.<sup>3</sup> A study in Ghana showed that less than 36.1% ( $n = 57$ ) compared to that of Nigeria where 25% ( $n = 30$ ) of nurses participated in designing and planning of research.<sup>3-5</sup> In India, 38.7% ( $n = 51$ ) nurses cited poor knowledge of numbers<sup>6</sup> and in Norway, lack of skills in using computerised statistical packages and low educational training, as reasons for their poor involvement in research activities.<sup>7</sup> Although evidence suggests increased involvement of South African critical care nurses in research compared to other countries in Africa, 21.3% ( $n = 17$ ) of nurses were unfamiliar with the term ‘evidence-based practice’ (EBP).<sup>8</sup> Identifying barriers nurses experience when conducting, participating and utilising research is the first step towards demystifying the fears associated with research.

The fast-changing healthcare environment demands that nurses discharge their duties within the confines of evidence-based practice, which has been found to improve the quality of patient care, raise the standard of nursing practice, enhance professional excellence and career advancement.<sup>9</sup>

Even the general public think research is important; 8 in 10 people think health research is very important and half of people think patients receive better quality of care where clinicians conduct research.<sup>10,11</sup> However, most nurses find the rigorous scientific enquiry challenging because of lack of adequate research knowledge and confidence to complete the process. Lack of time, motivation and incentive to conduct research, low educational qualification, lack of resources and management support are some of the challenges cited.<sup>4,6,11-13</sup>

Conducting research in an environment that demands prompt care delivery, achievement of role expectation and improving patient outcomes could also act as a disincentive for engaging in the rigorous academic activities.<sup>1,14,15</sup> Concerns around the “how” and “why” of engaging in research exists as some nurses think it is the exclusive duty of the ‘academics’.<sup>4,16</sup> Nursing literature affirms that the urgency to complete the ‘job’, shortage of nursing staff, belief that conducting research is the exclusive job of medical professionals, lack of award system and non-recognition of nurse-researchers, appears to limit nurses’ participation in and utilisation of research.<sup>3,16</sup>

These challenges also appear to be responsible for the existing wide gap between research and practice.<sup>2</sup> Research workshops and training, seminars have been shown to strengthen nurses’ research skills and to also build a research culture within the organisation.<sup>16</sup> Difficulties around lack of access to current literature and non-availability of research support in hospitals was found to limit nurses’ access to best available evidence and result in non-implementation

of current treatment models.<sup>17</sup> Another challenge to nursing research is that nurses have limited access to research funds and limited capacity to win competitive research grants. Klopper and Gasanganwa<sup>18</sup> suggest that inter-professional collaboration and availability of research-supported funding opportunities for nurses in service areas might build capacity to lead future research activities. Although evidence suggests that conducting research is rigorous, it can also be beneficial as it can facilitate networking, be an avenue to develop relationship with peers and improve the quality of care for patients, their families and communities.<sup>18</sup>

Although the research process can be unfamiliar to beginners and engaging with the research process can be intimidating and time consuming, nurses who have received harsh criticism or unhelpful feedback from mentors in their previous attempt at research may have developed lowered expectations of themselves and become less enthusiastic to start the process.<sup>19</sup> In such instances, it is then the responsibility of nurse leaders to minimise fear associated with research by promoting a research-supportive environment,<sup>20,21</sup> communicate openly, set clear mutual objectives, and establish structures and process that can facilitate success.<sup>22</sup>

### Solution to research-phobia for nurses in clinical service areas

A relevant question to ask is, “How can nurses working in the clinical service area be actively involved in research? We are suggesting that these nurses just START:

#### S – Start simple

One way nurses can overcome research-phobia is to start with a small research idea, consistently work on it and see it through to the end. Complexity can be built into a future study, once you have gained some experience. So, start off with a basic design – maybe a simple survey or an audit of patient records or the ward admission book. Remember that research topics relevant to patient care and staff interests are likely to increase staff enthusiasm, participation and commitment to the study.<sup>16</sup> Oftentimes, just being open to research opportunities can lead to exciting developments, including possibly building valuable inter-professional research collaboration.<sup>16</sup>

#### T – Target

It is advisable to have a goal for the research project and be very clear about the endpoint you want to achieve, for example presenting to the staff in your unit, speaking at a workshop or conference or writing an article. Literature suggest that conducting research without disseminating its outcomes will not provide the evidence required for improving practice,<sup>23</sup> and this might jeopardise nurses’ commitment to social accountability necessary to address complex health needs of the society. To maintain focus, these

tips may prove useful: i) develop a research plan stating the stages of your research study; ii) what is your dissemination plan, that is, how will you tell people about your research? And iii) tell other staff about it so that they can help to keep you accountable and remind you so as to ensure you keep progressing and working on it.

#### A – Arrange your team

In the beginning, it is important to build a research team to help guide the process and finding a research expert or mentor<sup>24</sup> in the field may be very useful in avoiding the situation of the “*blind leading the blind*”. Nursing literature emphasises that mentoring has been found to strengthen nurses’ research skills, minimise frustration and enhance speedy completion of the process<sup>16</sup> and nurse mentors have been influential in the translation of research into evidence-based practice.<sup>13</sup> Mentoring has been found to be beneficial in offering direction and assistance to emerging nurse researchers and increase active involvement in making decisions about care.<sup>24</sup> There is the need to identify a research champion, preferably a nurse with advanced research skills who is passionate about research and ready to lead and inspire the team.<sup>2</sup> Research champions’ responsibilities include monitoring and assisting with the research process from conceptualising to the dissemination of findings stages.<sup>21</sup>

#### R – Consider the relevance

Starting a research study demands consideration for relevance, significance and social accountability. Relevant studies have been found to facilitate clinical enquiry, provide evidence for improved health outcomes and benchmark for policy formulation.<sup>21</sup> Useful questions to consider are: *Will this research provide evidence for a change in practice? Will it deliver more efficient and effective nursing care? Will it shape policy? How can the study enhance career advancement?* Answering these questions might provide guidance regarding the relevance of the study and nurse researchers have a lot to gain by conducting studies directly relevant to their practice and interest.

#### T – Timelines

It is important that researchers establish timelines and communicate due dates regularly to team members as this can help them to focus and ensure that they keep to it. In ever-busy wards, allowing a “research holiday” or time off for nurses involved in research might go a long way to encourage their involvement in research. In most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa, nurses working in service areas are less likely to receive financial support from hospital administrations, hence the lack of enthusiasm for research. Hospital administrators can support research by allocating fund to support research on annual budget so that nurse-researchers can access such funding opportunities.

## Conclusion

In order to address the fear associated with research we need to demystify research for nurses and make it seem accessible and possible to carry out in the clinical service areas. Incentives need to be provided for nurses to motivate them to do research<sup>8</sup> and to publicly acknowledge nurses who are conducting research in the clinical service areas. Healthcare settings should also strive to create opportunities for dissemination and implementation of research outcomes where possible, as this would go a long way to boosting researcher morale and further motivate peers. Understanding that today’s research is tomorrow’s standard of care, should encourage every nurse to accept that research is actually the business of every nurse.

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