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Research nurse and nurse researcher: differences and similarities

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EDITORIAL ARTICLE

RESEARCH NURSE AND NURSE RESEARCHER: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

A Research Nurse (RN) and Nurse Researcher (NR) are two job titles involving the art and science of nursing, yet, there are fundamental differences in the two roles which often get confused with one another. A RN contributes to science with a focus on the care of the research study participant and the coordination of research activities in a research practice setting, while a NR provides a significant body of new knowledge to advance nursing practice, shapes health policy, and impacts patient care through the application of their research findings. Therefore, whereas the RN's role involves working on projects related to treatments and patient care, a NR is based on the acquisition of new knowledge related to the progression of nursing science.¹

The Research Nurse

The Research Nurse or Clinical Research Nurse is a professional who is mainly involved in clinical trials and other research projects. Clinical trials are designed to study new drugs that are not yet approved by a corresponding scientific body, new uses of drugs that are already approved, new ways to administer drugs or the use of alternative medicines/treatments. Within this context, a RN may be using his/her advanced practice competencies, critical thinking, effective decision making and concrete action taking in order to achieve study goals and ultimately improve care delivery.

Within the spectrum of clinical trials, the RN is often the focal point of contact for study participants. They are there to answer any questions the patient may have regarding the study from their initial introduction to the study until they finish the trial. The research nurse often has to triage phone calls from patients who call with complaints, and must have the knowledge and confidence to handle these calls tactfully, efficiently and safely while understanding their own limitations and referring patients to other members of the care team when necessary. There is also may be a great deal of communication with the pharmaceutical company if the study is commercially sponsored as well as with the various departments involved, such as imaging, pathology and labs.²

Although the above is not an exhaustive list of a RN's responsibilities, they contain the main tasks and responsibilities of the role. Furthermore, this is a role that requires taking the initiative and having adequate drive to keep all aspects of a study relevant. Often nurses are drawn to research because they feel it is exciting to be at the cutting edge of new developments and they like being part of improving clinical practice plus they may be attracted to the autonomy and status that research roles offer. The RN's multiple involvement in a study includes:³

Protocol Development: The RN is often involved early on in a clinical trial, i.e. during the initial development of the study protocol by aiding in determining criteria for inclusion, fine-tune measurements and other research tools, defining levels of patient's involvement or even sometimes contribute to the intervention itself.

Study Approvals: the RN can act as the trial representative in seeking study approval by the appropriate Ethics Committee. The RN could also have an input in completing application forms and submitting them to the corresponding authorities for review and approval.

Informed Consent: the RN will reach out to potential study-participants and once full information on the trial has been provided, will seek for written consent of the participant in order to partake.

Patient Recruitment: the RN may also have the responsibility of identifying and approaching potential participants for a study or a clinical trial. In this sense, the RN may be the best candidate for this task, as they are in a position to break down the barriers between care delivery and research by ensuring excellence in both fields.

Data Collection and Safety Reporting: The RN involved in a clinical trial, whether at the recruitment stage or during the intervention phase per se, may be tasked to collect all relevant data with accuracy and integrity as ultimately robust data is required to maintain patient safety in all cases.

Tissue and Sample Collection and Processing: RNs with suitable clinical backgrounds may use their laboratory skills to acquire process, store or even analyze various tissue samples as per the study protocol.

The Nurse Researcher

Nurse researchers are scientists who study in a robust manner all aspects of health, illness, care delivery and health care structures. A NR is an advanced nurse who elaborates on various aspects of healthcare and illness. It is within their scope of practice to apply the rigor of scientific research in order to uncover new methods to improve healthcare delivery and patient outcomes. Thus, a NR has advanced from nursing registration to advanced training in scientific research and data management.^{4,5}

In this context, NRs design and implement scientific studies, while looking for ways to improve health, care services and outcomes. NRs propose valid research questions, design and conduct rigorous scientific studies, collect and analyze data with integrity and report their findings accordingly. In order to achieve this, they often rely on grants to fund their work, which requires writing research-grant proposals which meet certain criteria. Moreover, many NRs teach in academic settings and often publish articles and research reports for nursing literature internationally. Yet, in order to address complex questions and problems NRs often partner with scientists from other fields, such as medicine, nutrition and pharmacy.

A NR's day-to-day responsibilities include conducting rigorous studies in an effort to uncover such key healthcare elements as follows:⁶

- Creating and implementing rigorous scientific research studies
- Supervising and observing patient care, treatments, or procedures
- Collecting and analyzing data and information throughout their study
- Compiling research findings into a concise report
- Presenting research outcomes to colleagues and superiors
- Presenting results at meetings, conferences, and other relevant events
- Ensuring delivery of health care services in a more effective and efficient manner
- Improving quality of life for patients
- Encouraging patients to make healthy choices about nutrition, fitness and lifestyle
- Assuring patient safety and preventing injury and illness

- Providing care and comfort to patients via the application of evidence based practice regimes

Therefore, the results of nursing research is vital in building a new knowledge base to provide the evidence to guide interventions by nurses and other health care workers. For example, nursing research has improved prenatal care, patient recovery after major interventions and pain management for cancer and terminal care.

Prerequisites to become a NR include being a registered nurse with clinical experience; holding a Master of Science in Nursing (minimum qualification) or/and a doctorate degree from an accredited institution (desired). Moreover, a successful NR should also have considerable experience working in clinical research.

Conclusions

Although the titles RN and NR are often used inter-changeably, there are key differences in their scope, experience and professional roles. The RN is a valuable member of a multidisciplinary care team which may include a physician, a clinical research coordinator, a pharmacist, a biospecimen coordinator and a research assistant within a large clinical trial. Yet, the role of the RN includes determining consent and screening, eligibility criteria, treatment, grade and attributing toxicities, dose modification, concomitant medications, disease response, deviation and adverse event reporting.

Despite the similarities with the clinical trials scheme, a NR in contrast, serves in a variety of roles, both clinical and academic as well as a researcher, by mainly being the principal investigator. These roles may range from prevention and health advice to clinical nursing in sophisticated tertiary care settings.

Although a clinical research study is a team effort, both RNs and NRs have pivotal role within research teams, more than often aiding to generate new knowledge pertinent to nursing science.

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