

Research and Nurses – Engaging the clinical based nurse in research activities

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Abstract

Nurses are often involved in medically focused research projects. They frequently act as data collectors for these studies, which are regarded with respect and highly valued by members of the research team and unit staff alike. Nursing research involves the investigation of nursing problems with the goal being improvement of nursing care delivered to clients. The involvement of nurses in clinically focused nursing research has the potential to facilitate the development of team work and research skills, increased nursing knowledge and reduced confusion that may arise as to the difference between medically related projects and nursing research. Therefore nursing research activities should be of interest and valued by all nurses, but alas this is not the case. Many excuses are offered to explain nurses' reluctance to participate in or support nursing research including a lack of space, time, interest, resources, workload, and understanding. Strategies to improve nursing research activity among nurses include: support from nursing management; the development of a research plan; alignment of particular clinical units with nurse academics who have a research component within their job description; review of nursing research curricula and ensuring these are relevant to nurses; and an increase in research funding for nursing research activity. Unfortunately, none of these measures will succeed in promoting nursing research until the nurses themselves support colleagues undertaking the research within the clinical environment.

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Introduction

Nursing research is an issue that is constantly debated in nursing circles and many arguments have been presented to support the belief that all nurses have a professional obligation to participate in the development and testing of nursing knowledge through nursing research (Hundley, Milne, Leighton-Beck, Graham, & Fitzmaurice, 2000). Briones and Cecchini (1991) suggest that nursing research involves the investigation of nursing problems with the goal being the improvement of nursing focused patient care, while medical research yields information to improve medical care of patients. According to Sheilds and Pearn (2007), nurses are regularly joined to medically focused research studies as co-participants or informally through their work in caring for patients. This often creates a misconception in the clinical setting with many nurses believing they are

doing nursing research when they act as data collectors for medical research projects. However, many of the projects nurses find themselves involved with have been designed to yield data that are medically focused and as such they cannot be classified as nursing research. Although collaboration between medical and nursing personnel on joint research projects that benefit patients should be encouraged (Shields & Pearn), nurses must not lose sight of their role in the research process or the true meaning of nursing research.

According to Cutcliffe and Goward (2000), many nurses entering the research field for the first time wish to follow the familiar medical model for their nursing research project, with randomised clinical trials being the flavour of current times. This is a highly structured research method that may be a useful tool to investigate some nursing research questions, but if used alone or without thought or consideration for research outcomes, much of the rich, in-depth issues that affect nursing will be missed (Cutcliffe & Goward). The frequent use of this research model by nurses may indicate either a lack of knowledge about other research methods or reflect a belief that nursing research will only be accepted as credible if a highly structured model such as randomised clinical trials is used (Hundley, et al., 2000).

This view is supported by research undertaken by the UK researcher team of Davies, Heyman, Bryar, Graffy, Gunnell, Lamb, and Morris (2002). These researchers explored the research potential of practice nurses and discovered that nurses often experience barriers to being involved with research including a lack of understanding of the research process, time constraints, no work time available for research, isolation, and lack of support from medical officers (Davies, et al., 2002). Similar findings were uncovered by Crowe and Carlyle (2007) in their analysis of nursing research papers that focused on the development of mental health nursing research. Research undertaken in the UK by Rodgers (2000) into the utilisation of research findings by medical and surgical nurses also found a lack of understanding of how to interpret research was a barrier to the implementation of research findings in practice but that nurses did attempt to utilise research results to support their clinical decisions.

Although the literature has highlighted some problems areas with nurses' understanding of the research process, most nurses are aware of the need to improve patient care. Nurses meeting in tea rooms discuss many aspects of their patients' care and how things could be better if done another way. I have heard some brilliant research ideas come out of these discussions but at the completion of their tea break nurses promptly tip their ideas down the sink with the remains of their coffee. Well, I say to all those nurses, it's time to take the initiative and implement nursing research projects that may lead to these changes that you so strongly support at your informal gatherings.

Benefits of nursing research

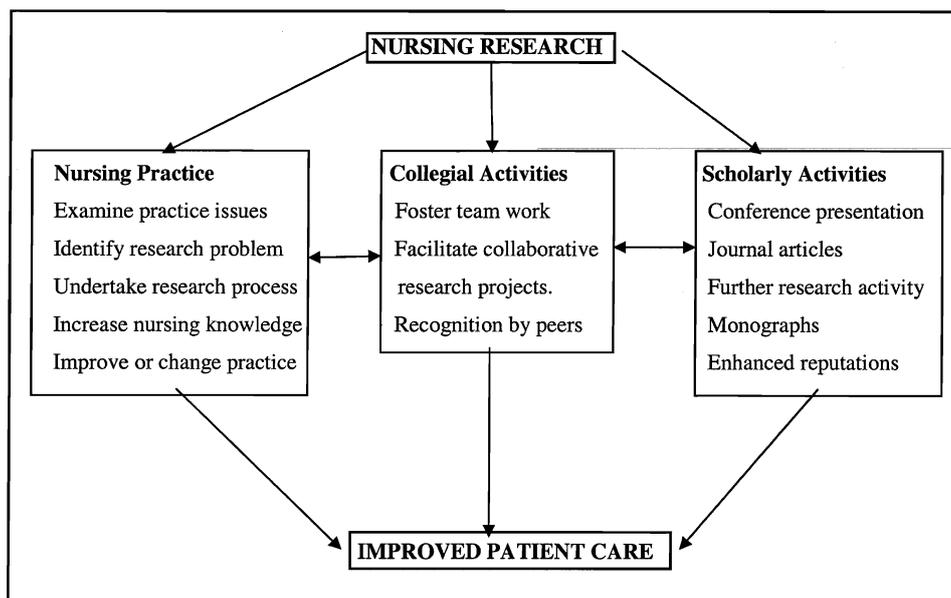
There are multiple benefits of nursing research. These include improvements to nursing practice, development of collegial activities and scholarly outputs. The first step in achieving these improvements begins with individual nurses looking critically and reflectively at their own nursing practice, resulting in the generation of researchable questions, the implementation of research projects, and changes in nursing practice (Birsk & Thompson, 1995).

The second step is the development of collegial activities. According to Rodgers (2000), nursing research activities foster team work and collaborative projects with nursing colleagues working together to solve nursing problems. This team work can also be extended to include members of other health care disciplines, but if this type of collaboration occurs on research projects, nurses must remember that only information that adds to the body of nursing knowledge can be considered nursing research.

Scholarly activities in the form of monograph, journal articles, and conference presentations generated by the nursing research process will add to nursing knowledge and raise issues that require further investigation. In addition, nursing research activity will enhance the reputation of individual nurses amongst peers as nursing practice will be researched and evidence based. Finally, and most importantly, the results of nursing research projects will culminate in improved nursing care delivered to patients (Roxburgh, 2006). See Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Benefits of nursing research



Strategies to improve nursing research within the clinical environment

One of the major criticisms of many nursing research projects involves the relevance of the research to nursing practice (Roxburgh, 2006). This is a valid criticism, but one which could be easily overcome with more clinicians becoming actively involved with nursing research. However, as previously discussed there are many reasons why nurses are reluctant or limited in their ability to participate

in nursing research projects. The literature has identified these reasons as being a lack of time, space, resources, support and understanding (Roxburgh).

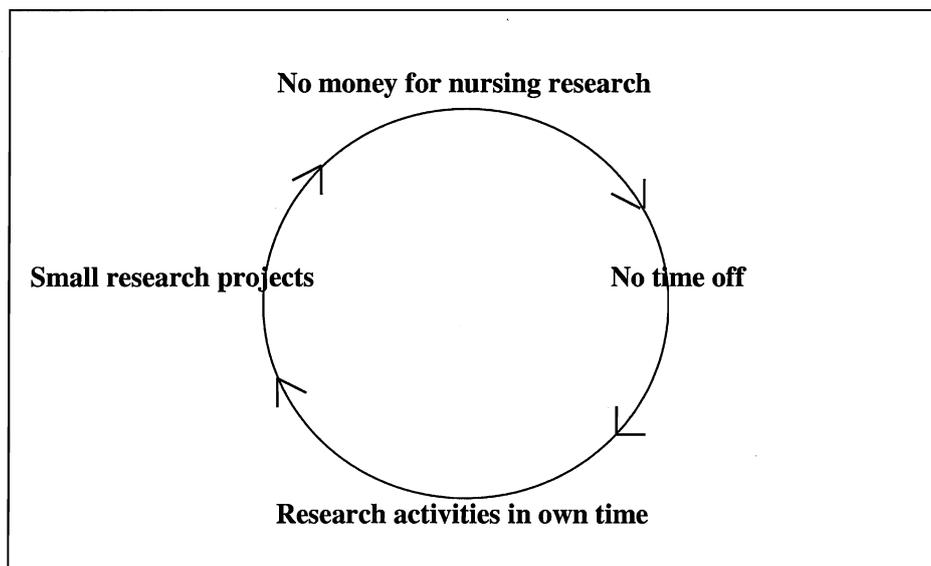
Strategies that may be implemented to improve nursing research activity include:

1. Nurse researchers and interested colleagues need to form nursing research groups to discuss issues relevant to patient care and ideas for improving nursing practice (Gillibrand, Burton, & Watkins, 2002).
2. A research plan should be developed at the beginning of the project, which clearly outlines the research objectives, the ward release time needed and the resources required. Issues such as: who will do the literature search, and who will identify potential sources of funding and prepare the applications should be discussed during the planning stage. This will ensure that all members of the research team know what is expected of them. This research plan will also be a practical tool for nurses to use when negotiating nursing staff-release time and resources required for nursing research projects (Fry, Mortimer, & Ramsay, 1994).
3. Many nurses wishing to undertake clinical nursing research require “off line” time to complete research activities such as literature searches and the writing of research proposals. The current structure of most hospitals does not allow for this and nurses often complete steps in the research process in their off duty time (Davies, et al., 2002). To support nurses in their research efforts nurse managers will need to examine their health care agencies objectives as they relate to nursing research and if necessary, initiate changes to policies to ensure support in the form of space to do research, time and resources, including computing facilities are available to nurses wishing to undertake nursing research projects (Gillibrand, et al., 2002).
4. The movement of nursing education to universities has resulted in the restructuring of nursing courses to provide greater academic content (Mulhall, 1995) but at what cost? Many nursing research curriculums focus on the quantitative—qualitative method debate, and do not provide nurses with “doing skills” for nursing research. To facilitate changes in nursing research courses and curriculums, a consultative process between both academics and clinicians is required to ensure clinical nursing needs are met, along with academic requirements (Gillibrand, et al., 2002). A consultative process between both groups should be undertaken with nurse educators reviewing the content and teaching methods used with nursing research subjects. Clinical nurses should be encouraged to express an interest in joining these groups to ensure that nursing research subjects meet their learning needs (French, 2005).
5. Another useful strategy to promote research skills in nurses involves the establishment of groups to undertake a research project facilitated by a nursing academic or an experienced nurse researcher. This activity would promote research skills, foster team work and encourage the development of knowledge and personal growth (Gillibrand, et al., 2002).
6. It is essential the potential nurse researcher to look closely at their topic to ensure they choose a research method that best reflects the question. This process may be facilitated by an experienced nurse researcher or nursing

academic. Discussions with other members of the health care team which involve the sharing of ideas about the aims of their nursing research projects and the types of research methods most appropriate to nursing research should promote interest and support (Roxburgh, 2006).

7. Nursing research skills need to be developed to a point where they become an integral part of nursing practice (Saarinen, 1995). Nurses often find themselves wearing many hats which creates an atmosphere of tension and stress within clinical environments. Nursing research skills need to be incorporated as a part of everyday clinical practice, leading to the development of a nursing research culture within clinical units.
8. Many nurses undertaking clinical nursing research have not previously written research proposals or applied for research funding grants. Many funding grant applications are complicated and time consuming, resulting in nurses shying away from even applying for grants (Saarinen, 1995). This situation results in a lack of financial support for nursing research projects which sets up the vicious circle of no money for nursing research, resulting in no time off, which means research activities are undertaken in the nurses' own free time. This situation results in small and often isolated research projects, which leads to a lack of confidence and raises questions with nurses as to the value of nursing research (Retsas, 2000). See Figure 2.

Figure 2 Nursing Research—Funding Crisis Circle



This vicious circle creates stressful situations for nurses with the outcome being a fear of research, which results in minimal nursing research activities. To overcome these situations, simpler, more straight forward grant application forms are needed with collaboration in the writing of research grant applications occurring between nurse clinicians and nurse academics, but most importantly there needs to be an increase in the funding sources available to nurses wishing to undertake clinical nursing research (Roxburgh, 2006).

The lack of funding for nursing research is in contrast to the numerous funding sources available for medical and health related research studies. These projects are often well funded and, according to Sheilds and Pearn (2007), this has allowed for the payment of research participants. These authors raise questions about the ethics

of research that pays for the participation of patients who they argue, are in essences, “ethical captives” and may not have the opportunity or feel they have a right to refuse to participate in medically focused research studies. Shields and Pearn argue that nurses need to be mindful of all ethical issues when conducting research and if successful with research funding applications, should not follow the current trend some medical researchers have adopted of paying for research participants’ time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can see the great dilemma confronting clinically based nurses. The expectation of today’s nurse is to be a competent clinician and now a nurse researcher. This is a very demanding role which brings with it great challenges, but the importance of nursing research to the development of nursing cannot be overlooked as it will provide the answers to many of the patient centred problems confronting nurses on a daily basis.

The need for more funding for nursing research has never been more evident. The recent movement towards evidence based practice to ensure the delivery of quality patient care has led many nurses to begin exploring ideas for nursing research. However to be successful in their research endeavours, nurses need financial support for their projects and the endorsement of nurse managers. Collaboration with nurse academics will facilitate the research process and the writing of grant applications. Nurse academics will also need to revise how research is being taught in universities and provide nurses with “doing skills” to enable them to fulfil the role of clinical nurse researcher. Although the adoption of these strategies will see an increase in nursing research activity, nurses must remember that support of colleagues confronting the challenges presented by the research process is the most important step in the growth of nursing.

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