

Promoting the Place of the Allied Health Professions in Clinical Research

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Text received May 12th, 2014; accepted May 27th, 2014

Keywords:

allied health professions;
clinical research;
nursing research;
CRNs; CRTs;
CRAs

Abstract – Clinical research is of major importance to today's society, as scientific evidence is increasingly demanded as a basis for progress, whether this involves developing new healthcare products, improving clinical practice and care protocols or progress in prevention. Clinical research therefore requires professionals who are both experienced and increasingly well trained. Against this background, allied health professionals are becoming involved more and more, both as team members supporting clinical research projects and as managers or coordinators of projects in their own field. Clinical research activities provide an ideal opportunity for continuing professional development. All of this means that the professional skills of the allied health professions and clinical research support professions must be enhanced, their role promoted in the context of lecturer status and in the longer term, their status recognised by the supervisory authorities.

Abbreviations: see end of article.

1. Introduction

Healthcare is a complex field, in which scientific knowledge is continuously evolving, in relation both to society's individual and collective concepts and to biological, medico-technical, economic

and political concepts. The involvement of allied health professions in research on patients (clinical research) and in the population is of major importance, both in terms of the individuals' quality of life and in terms of preventive care and cost-effectiveness of care for all age groups. We can speak of involvement of an allied health

† Articles, analyzes and proposals from the Giens Workshops are those of the authors and do not prejudice the position of their parent organization.

Table I. Survey on perceptions of the level of training of research support professions.

<p>Aim of the survey: to look at how CRAs and CRTs perceive their own knowledge about clinical research, by comparison with how the investigators view it.</p> <p>Method: questionnaire comprising 3 set of questions about the knowledge and understanding of research support personnel concerning: 1/ the principles of clinical research; 2/ the organisation of a study centre; 3/ the elements of one study in particular (protocol, method, technical aspects). Each answer consisted of a score from 1 (completely adequate) to 5 (inadequate).</p> <p>Results: 88 questionnaires were completed, two thirds of them by investigators. For most of the questions, the results revealed a difference between the perceptions of the research support staff and the investigators. The research staff's assessment of their own knowledge tended to be inferior to that of the investigators.</p>
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CRAs: clinical research associate; CRTs: clinical research technicians

professional when they are actively involved in any given area of research, ranging from collecting data to being the actual researcher or coordinator.

The outcome of this involvement and indeed a prerequisite for it is increasingly highly trained, experienced and qualified health professionals who are committed to research aimed at developing scientific evidence that can be used both in clinical practice (prevention and care of diseases, end-of-life support, etc.) and to develop knowledge about a disease, support patients with a disease or to develop a care procedure or protocol, etc.

The involvement of allied health professionals is recognised and valued in America and the United Kingdom, but in France it is more complex and is still a grey area, due to lack of knowledge about the subject and to wide variations in situations, training and status. It is therefore both necessary and important for us to focus attention on the place of the allied health professions in clinical research. This issue was the subject of one of the October 2013 Giens pharmacology think tank workshops. The purpose of this article is to describe the context surrounding the place of the allied health professions in clinical research and to formulate recommendations aimed at promoting it.

2. Method

The workshop group consisted of representatives from the industrial community (19 participants) and the academic community (10 participants) and two members of public bodies (Health Authority [*Haute autorité de santé*, HAS] and French National Health and Medical Research Institute [*Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale*, INSERM]). Given the topic under discussion, four of these participants were nurses¹.

Several preparatory meetings were held before the workshop, some with the whole group and some in sub-groups. These provided

1. Two nurses with a PhD (in public health and educational science respectively), one of whom was an authorised clinical research director and two nurses currently working on their PhDs (in cognitive science and public health respectively).

Table II. List of 'auxiliary clinical staff' (cf. Public Health Code Book III – *Code de la santé publique, livre III*).

- Nurse
- Physiotherapist-masseur
- Chiropodist / podiatrist
- Occupational therapist
- Psychomotor therapist
- Speech therapist
- Orthoptist
- Radiology technician
- Medical laboratory technician
- Hearing aid dispenser
- Optician
- Prosthetist or orthotist specialising in equipment for people with a disability
- Dietitian

an opportunity to find out about the other members' environments and above all to define the scope of the discussion topics: the allied health professions *per se* and their role in research. A short survey on perceptions of the level of training among research support professions was also conducted before the workshop and was used as input for the discussions (table I).

2.1. Who are the allied health professions?

In France, the terms allied health professions and allied health professional (*paramédical*) are not legally defined terms. The Public Health Code (Book III) refers to 'auxiliary clinical staff'², represented by 13 different professions, including nurses³ and physiotherapist-masseurs (table II). In 2013, there were over 800,000 auxiliary clinical staff in France,^[1] 595,594 of whom were nurses (of these, approximately 20% were self-employed community nurses, therefore the vast majority of them were hospital nurses).

2. Although this is a somewhat awkward term, most of the professions have had their own clearly defined role for many years.

3. Both male and female nurses.

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