



EDUCATION ISSUES

An innovative program to close the gap from research to practice: A clinical neonatal nursing fellowship



Kaye Spence, AM BEd(N) MN (Research), Clinical Nurse Consultant – Neonatology, Nurse Manager^{a,b,*},
Angela Casey, RN M, Health Manager^a

^a *The Sydney Children's Hospitals Network (Westmead), Australia*

^b *School of Nursing and Midwifery, Queens University Belfast, United Kingdom*

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Abstract Neonatal nursing is specialised and nurses are encouraged to provide evidence for their practice. We established a *Clinical Neonatal Nursing Research Fellowship* to provide an opportunity for clinical nurses to learn about research. We describe how this innovative program can be implemented in an NICU to support clinical nurses undertaking research. External funding was initially obtained to enable the applicant's clinical position to be back-filled. Applications included a small research proposal to be undertaken in the NICU and there have been five experienced neonatal nurses complete the program.

The establishment of the *Fellowship* has enabled us to create a research culture of enquiry amongst clinical nurses. This is a useful model for other NICUs who are willing to take the initiative to set-up an opportunity. The studies chosen by the *Fellowship* nurses are topics of interest and/or concern within their NICU and show how nurses can make a difference to their clinical practice through enquiry and research.

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Introduction

This paper describes an initiative to increase clinical nurses' involvement in research in the neonatal intensive care unit. Opportunities were created to enable a clinical neonatal nursing

* Corresponding author. Grace Centre for Newborn Care, The Children's Hospital at Westmead, Locked Bag 4001, Westmead NSW 2145, Australia. Tel.: +61 2 98452720; fax: +61 2 98452251.

E-mail address: kaye.spence@health.nsw.gov.au (K. Spence).

research fellowship to be established with the goal of integrating research into practice and close the evidence practice gap.

Background

Using research in nurses' clinical practice has been the subject of publications (Squires et al. 2011). How nurses use research and how they have access to research is a challenge, often dependant on the current environment and perceptions of the health team. The focus of clinical nursing has been to provide the best care and this may be based on expertise of the nurse, experiences, evidence or culture of the organisation or nursing culture. Research has been seen as the domain of scientists and academics. However, if there is to be a culture of clinical research with forums provided for nurses to be involved with the research then this requires collaboration between clinical researchers and managers to facilitate a positive environment. Leadership behaviours of nurse managers have been identified as important to support research use and evidence-based practice (Gifford et al., 2007).

Neonatal nursing is a highly specialised field where clinical nurses are encouraged to provide an evidence base for their practice. The gaining of knowledge occurs through specialised programs of study, peer support and mentoring as well as engagement with the multi-disciplinary team (Chan, 2011). The unit culture can be conducive to ideas, questioning practice and seeking out answers as to why practices occur or require change. Fostering nurses to undertake a research interest is dependent on the nursing leadership within the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Providing opportunities for nurses to experience research can be undertaken through support to attend workshops, seminar and high level scientific conferences where they are exposed to the various levels and methodologies of research as well as the research communities.

A research culture within nursing is influenced by leadership and requires nurse researchers to have leadership capabilities. If there is to be a cultural shift then nurses engaged in research need to lead the change based on their research experiences and outcomes. Skills such as critical thinking, being able to work independently as well as having experiences to draw on can contribute to the success of a research program.

We sought to take the research opportunity to the next step with the establishment of a *Clinical*

Neonatal Nursing Research Fellowship. The aim of this innovative program was to provide an opportunity for clinical neonatal nurses to expand their knowledge in research. Support was provided to the nurse to make the transition from clinical practice to clinical research, while facilitating a research focus for nursing care in the neonatal unit.

This paper describes the establishment of a *Clinical Nursing Research Fellowship* in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and summarises the first five fellowships.

Method

The NICU is a high technological environment where research based practice is the focus of decision-making. As part of the multi-disciplinary team nurses are encouraged to apply the evidence for their practice. In order to facilitate nurses understanding of the research process, methods and outcomes as well as the opportunity to gain experience with research the fellowship program was identified as an innovative initiative. Initially there was considerable support from nursing management as well as the medical leads in the NICU.

External funding was obtained to establish the fellowship to enable the successful applicant's clinical position to be back-filled from the roster for 6–8 shifts per four week roster. Having funding was a guarantee that the nurse would not be used in times of high demand for clinical staff. This enabled the fellowship days to be continuous to assist with the continuity of the learning experience. The scholarship was awarded and administered by a management group comprising of the Clinical Nurse Consultant (Neonatology) and Nurse Manager with support from one of the Neonatologists and Professor of Paediatric Nursing if required.

Each year a call was placed for applications for the fellowship. The submission from the individual nurses included a proposal for a research project to be undertaken in the NICU and their curricula vitae (CV). The proposal included a statement of the project to be undertaken and an outline of the proposed methodology which was discussed with and approved by the management group. There was an opportunity for the proposal to be considered as part of a higher degree or continuing education. The successful applicant was expected to demonstrate a commitment to professional development, demonstrated evidence of critical inquiry and an interest in research processes. A

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