RESEARCH REFLECTION

Nurse practitioner engagement in research

by Leah K. Lambert and Laura M. Housden

INTRODUCTION

Nurse practitioners (NPs) are recognized as having distinct knowledge and skills including their role in NP-led and NP-involved research. Nurse practitioners are registered nurses who have completed additional education, often at the Master’s level, and are able to work in an expanded scope of practice (Donald et al., 2010; Kaasalainen et al., 2010). This includes the ability to diagnose, write prescriptions, order laboratory tests, and refer patients to specialists (Sangster-Gormley, 2016). Over the past 40 years, research has demonstrated that NPs provide safe and effective care (Horrocks, Anderson, & Salisbury, 2002; Mundinger, Kane, Lenz, & Trial, 2009; Sackett et al., 1974; Sangster-Gormley, Frisch, & Schreiber, 2013).

To date, a large focus of NP research in Canada has been in primary care (Burgess & Purkis, 2010; Heale, 2012; Roots & MacDonald, 2014; Russell et al., 2009; Sangster-Gormley, Martin-Misener, & Burge, 2013; Way, Jones, Baskerville, & Busing, 2001). Nurse practitioners, however, are increasingly working in highly specialized areas including acute and community oncology settings (Stahlke Wall & Rawson, 2016). The move towards specialized areas of practice has created new and exciting opportunities for NP research in Canada and emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unique voice of NPs in healthcare. The purpose of this paper is to explore opportunities for NPs to engage in research, with a focus on NPs practising in oncology care, and to provide a brief discussion of knowledge dissemination activities.

NURSE PRACTITIONER ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH

As advanced practice nurses (APNs), NPs are uniquely positioned to lead and participate in research that is meaningful to their complex practice environments. Nurse practitioners are required to engage in evidence-based practice (EBP) and maintain clinical competency, which in Canada is regulated provincially and territorially (Wong & Farrally, 2013). Nurse practitioners also maintain competency through reading and incorporating evidence-based publications into practice; attending professional conferences; and participating in journal clubs and formal organizations such as communities of practice and professional associations. In speaking with colleagues, we know that NPs are interested in contributing to research in meaningful ways. However, there is some uncertainty for NPs in knowing where to start and how to negotiate involvement in research that extends beyond the activities required to meet continued practice competency (e.g., incorporating evidence into clinical practice). Nurse practitioners may also experience difficulty reconciling how to initiate a research project with limited time and resources available to support such efforts. It is, therefore, important for NPs to identify how to engage in research in ways that are accessible while working in busy clinical practices.

WHERE TO START IN GETTING INVOLVED WITH RESEARCH

Identifying an issue of clinical relevance that stems from practice experience and observation is one way to begin the research process. Real-world clinical observations may give rise to innovative research questions or new ways of looking at a phenomenon of interest. Planning a research project and determining an appropriate strategy of inquiry, however, can be challenging for busy clinicians, and this is where the interdisciplinary environment of oncology care can be invaluable. Nurse practitioners should be cognizant of opportunities to collaborate with interdisciplinary partners (e.g., oncologists, registered nurses, and pharmacists) who can add important perspectives to a research project. A helpful resource on how to partner and collaborate in research is the Guide to Researcher and Knowledge-User Collaboration in Health Research developed by the Participatory Research at McGill group (Parry, Salsberg, & Macaulay, 2009). This comprehensive learning module uses everyday language, including several examples and case studies, to illustrate how to identify and develop research partnerships.

Looking for ‘in-house’ research opportunities within an NP’s practice organization may be another way to begin the research process. Most NPs in Canada work for health authorities or provincial organizations, where their salaries are paid for by government funding (Kaasalainen et al., 2010; Wong & Farrally, 2013). This includes NPs who work in specialized areas such as oncology care. There may be unique opportunities within these organizations that NPs are unaware of, including assisting on established research.

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### Table 1: Research strategies

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<th>Strategy</th>
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<td>Qualitative study</td>
<td>NP practice environments involve complex phenomena and qualitative methodologies can guide the exploration of these complexities. For example, Stahlke Wall and Rawson (2016) conducted a qualitative study to explore characteristics of the NP role in cancer care and identify the unique value of NP-provided care. Small qualitative studies can sometimes be conducted with little financial resources yet yield important findings, making qualitative work more accessible to investigators with limited funding. Qualitative data collection methods include, but are not limited to, participant interviews, focus groups, participant observation, open-ended surveys, and textual analyses (e.g., health records and policy documents) (Polit &amp; Beck, 2012).</td>
<td>Example: Stahlke Wall, S., &amp; Rawson, K. (2016). The nurse practitioner role in oncology: Advancing patient care. Oncology Nursing Forum, 43(4), 489–496.</td>
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<td>Needs Assessment</td>
<td>A needs assessment is a systematic process of identifying unmet needs and priorities of a sample population. It involves the use of qualitative and/or quantitative research methods to collect data. A needs assessment can be used to identify: 1) the specific needs of a population, 2) gaps in patient care, and 3) patient preferences. For example, Fitch and Maamoun (2016) conducted a needs assessment for the purposes of informing program development, in which they assessed the unmet supportive care needs of cancer patients undergoing radiation treatment and their desire for assistance in meeting those needs.</td>
<td>Example: Fitch, M.J., &amp; Maamoun, J. (2016). Unmet supportive care needs and desire for assistance in patients receiving radiation treatment: Implications for oncology nursing. Canadian Oncology Nursing Journal, 26(1), 53–59. Resource: Polit, D.F., &amp; Beck, C.T. (2012). Nursing research: Generating and assessing evidence for nursing practice (9th ed.). Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams &amp; Wilkins.</td>
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<td>Survey</td>
<td>Surveys or questionnaires are used to elicit information about the prevalence and interrelationship of variables from a sample population (Polit &amp; Beck, 2012). There are a variety of standardized questionnaires available that NPs can use in their research endeavours. While these questionnaires are primarily quantitative in nature, some may also include a qualitative component. The APN chair program established a toolkit of data collection tools for use in APN research (CHSRF/CIHR Chair Program in Advanced Practice Nursing, n.d.). These tools are organized according to role development, role implementation, and role evaluation. The toolkit also includes questionnaires to examine patient outcomes. Nurse practitioners who are interested in using a standardized questionnaire are encouraged to explore this site for previously established and tested data collection tools.</td>
<td>Example: Macartney, G., Stacey, D., Carley, M., &amp; Harrison, M.B. (2012). Priorities, barriers and facilitators for remote support of cancer symptoms: A survey of Canadian oncology nurses. Canadian Oncology Nursing Journal, 22(4), 235–47. Resources: CHSRF/CIHR Chair Program in Advanced Practice Nursing (n.d.). Data Collection Tools. Retrieved from: <a href="http://apntoolkit.mcmaster.ca/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=2433&amp;Itemid=2">http://apntoolkit.mcmaster.ca/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=2433&amp;Itemid=2</a></td>
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projects or helping the leadership team to answer important practice questions. Organizations may also be able to assist NPs with funding and research support throughout the course of a project. For these reasons, it is important that NPs reach out to organizational leaders when interested in engaging in research.

RESEARCH STRATEGIES

There is a wide range of research methodologies available for use in knowledge development including quantitative and qualitative methods. Some methods are extensive and require significant time and expertise (e.g., randomized control trials), and other methods may be more manageable for novice researchers. A few of the ways NPs might engage in research include conducting a structured literature review, undertaking a small qualitative study or pilot project, completing a needs assessment, or administering a standardized survey. In Table 1, we have outlined these suggestions and offered examples for each research strategy along with a list of resources for NPs to consider. While this is by no means a comprehensive list of strategies available, these suggestions may be useful for NPs in thinking about how to negotiate a greater involvement in research.

KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

An important aspect of any research project includes knowledge dissemination activities.

A range of knowledge dissemination approaches exist, some more accessible and less time intensive than others. In determining how to share knowledge, researchers need to consider the intended audience and identify the best way to effectively communicate their findings. A common way of communicating research results is to publish findings in peer-reviewed journals. While publishing may seem like a daunting task, writing resources may be available through universities, professional associations, or organizational affiliations. Nurse practitioners may also use partnerships established in the research process to collaborate on writing projects.

Publications, however, need not only be limited to research results. Nurse Practitioners can also reflect on experiences they had during the research process or in clinical practice by publishing these experiences in a reflection column. A research or practice reflection is a way for NPs to describe and analyze their experiences. Nurse practitioners can use their voice to articulate concerns and experiences that arise in the course of their work that may also represent commonalities across practice disciplines. Practice reflections that draw on experiential knowledge and make these aspects of practice explicitly known to others can be valuable in advancing NP dialogue on important matters. For example, a practice reflection could highlight the barriers and facilitators encountered by a new NP in transitioning to an oncology practice setting.

In terms of where to publish, NPs could consider organizational publications (e.g., health authority or regional newsletters), as well as peer-reviewed journals. Many journals welcome submissions by new researchers and can provide valuable feedback during the peer-review process. Editors will often respond to publication queries, and NPs can contact the editor in advance to discuss the appropriateness of the article for the journal. While NP-focused journals may be a familiar resource, NPs ought to consider the value of making research visible to broader audiences by publishing in interdisciplinary journals.

Oral or poster presentations are also an excellent way of sharing new knowledge. In the oncology setting there are often many local opportunities to present. For instance, NPs might present their work at organizational level meetings and conferences, tumour board groups, grand rounds, guest lectures in academic programs, and through online webcasts offered by professional associations. National and international conferences, such as the Canadian Association of Nurses in Oncology annual conference, offer presentation opportunities for NPs to ensure their research reaches relevant audiences. Conferences can also help to connect NPs with a community of researchers and clinicians. There may also be additional, creative ways for NPs to disseminate knowledge in their specialized areas of practice that are not included here. Identifying key stakeholders and clearly defining relevant messages will help to clarify the best way to share knowledge with target audiences.

CONCLUSION

Nurse practitioners have a unique voice and perspective on the healthcare system and patient care that highlights the important contribution NPs can make to research. While there may be limited time and resources for NPs to embark on research endeavours, this process does not have to be too complicated. A range of opportunities exist for NPs to engage with research and knowledge dissemination in meaningful, yet accessible ways. We have suggested strategies for NPs to consider in thinking about leading and participating in research projects, and in planning the dissemination of new knowledge.

REFERENCES


