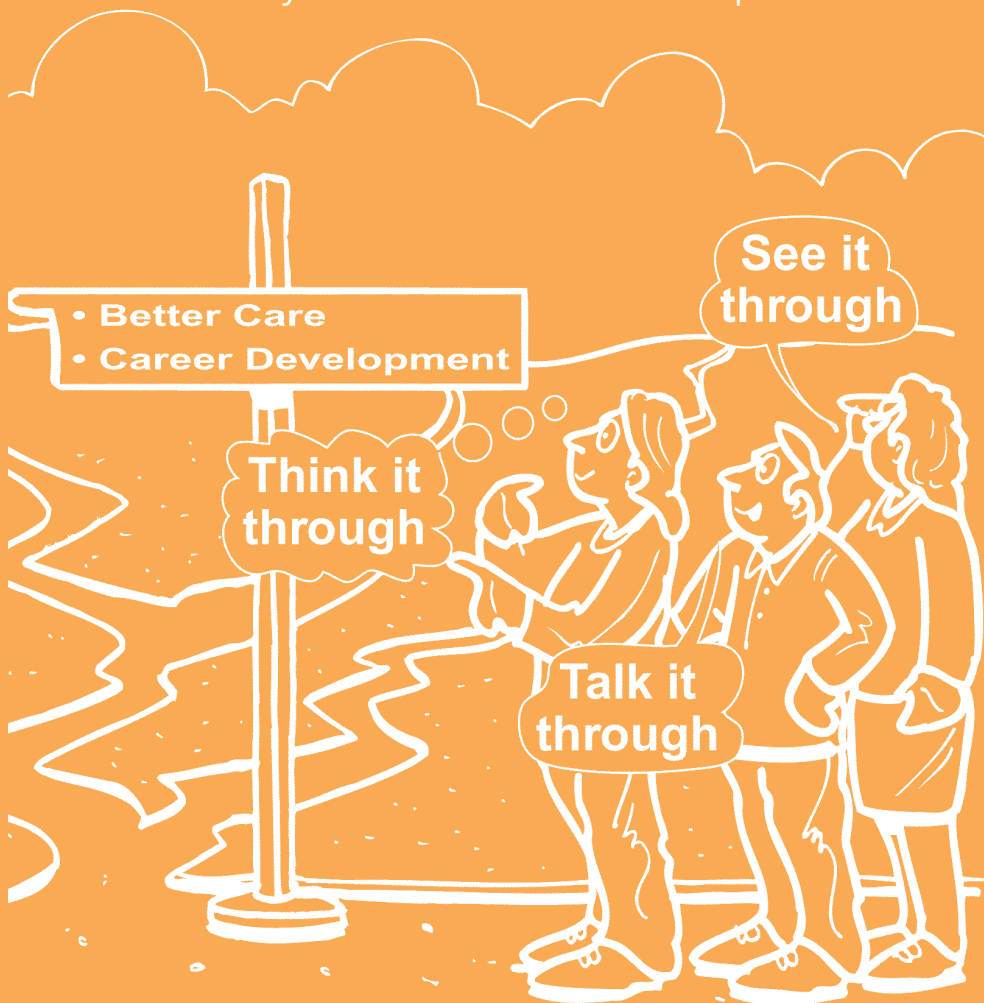


making choices, facing challenges

developing your research career in nursing,
midwifery and the allied health professions



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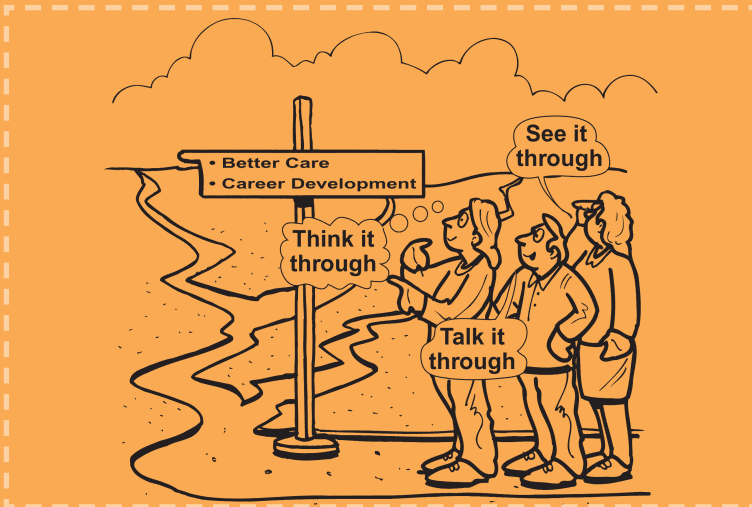
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1. introduction

This booklet is based on the belief that clinical research and clinical practice are inseparable. Clinical research must influence clinical practice, and clinical practice must influence the clinical research agenda. Each shares the common objective of providing high-quality health care based on the most up-to-date and reliable evidence.

The days when capable professionals had to all but leave the clinical arena to pursue their research dreams should be consigned to history. The vision of the modern nurse, midwife and allied health professional (AHP) researcher is of someone who is not only actively involved in clinical practice, but is also seen to be vital to its development, delivery and evaluation.

Nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions demand that their practitioners work from a robust knowledge and evidence base. Yet we know that much practice is not based on research evidence. Instead, factors such as tradition, personal experience and preferences, cost and even individual foibles play a significant role in determining how practice is delivered. This is changing, but we still have some way to go before the professions can claim to be truly 'evidence-based'.

The professions now realise the importance of research to their development and to the delivery of quality care. Research strategies and action plans have been produced for nurses, midwives and AHPs in recent years,^{1,2} and these have provided the driving force behind a number of exciting research-focused initiatives in Scotland. In addition, NHSScotland is encouraging the development of innovative, evidence-based practice that improves patient/client care and supports the drive to modernise services.

The climate is right, therefore, for enthusiastic, committed and motivated professionals to make their mark on clinical practice

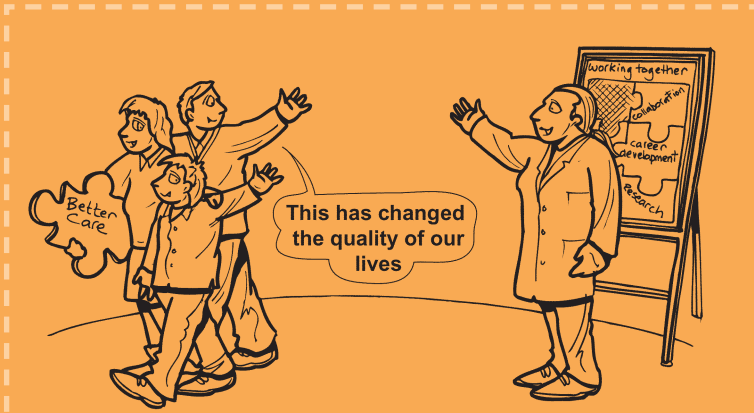


'I have learned to be tenacious and less anxious about seeking help, as I've found everyone is willing to share advice and practical help. The biggest hindrance is self doubt. Believe that you can do it – find solutions, and don't dwell on problems. And be prepared to take risks.'

Joyce Wilkinson (primary care nurse and PhD student)

through pursuing a clinical research career. This booklet identifies a route-map for aspiring researchers, setting out some of the main issues they will have to consider and the key messages that will help them to make the right choices as they move forward.

You will see some cartoons placed throughout the text. These are accompanied by comments and advice from real nurses, midwives and AHPs in Scotland who have been through, or are going through, the route you are currently considering.



'Working with [senior clinical research professor] made me realise that research really can make a difference to people's lives, and since then, it's been part of my life.'

Mary Wells (oncology clinical nurse specialist and PhD student)

Nurses, midwives and AHPs already make substantial contributions to uni- and multidisciplinary research that informs decisions made by patients/clients, practitioners, managers and policy makers. With adequate support from NHSScotland and funding bodies, and with access to top-quality research training within Scotland's higher education institutions (HEIs), the influence of these vital front-line professionals will be even more telling in the future.

Some professionals opt to increase their understanding of research through personal study, attending short courses designed to boost research awareness, or taking a research module within a course of study at diploma or degree level. There is also a variety of levels at which they can become engaged with research, from being research workers and collaborators through to leading research projects as the principal investigator.¹

Increasing numbers of nurses, midwives and AHPs have explored these options in recent years, but not all routes lead to a defined career in research. That destination can only be reached through systematic, comprehensive training that not only prepares students to design, develop, deliver and evaluate their projects as part of a wider programme of focused research, but which also cultivates the research leaders of the future. And we believe that this kind of expertise can best be achieved by completing studies at PhD and postdoctoral levels.

References

1. Scottish Executive Health Department (2002) *Choices and Challenges: the strategy for research and development in nursing and midwifery in Scotland*. Edinburgh: SEHD.
2. Scottish Executive Health Department (2004) *Allied Health Professions Research and Development Action Plan*. Edinburgh: SEHD.

2. the booklet and the website

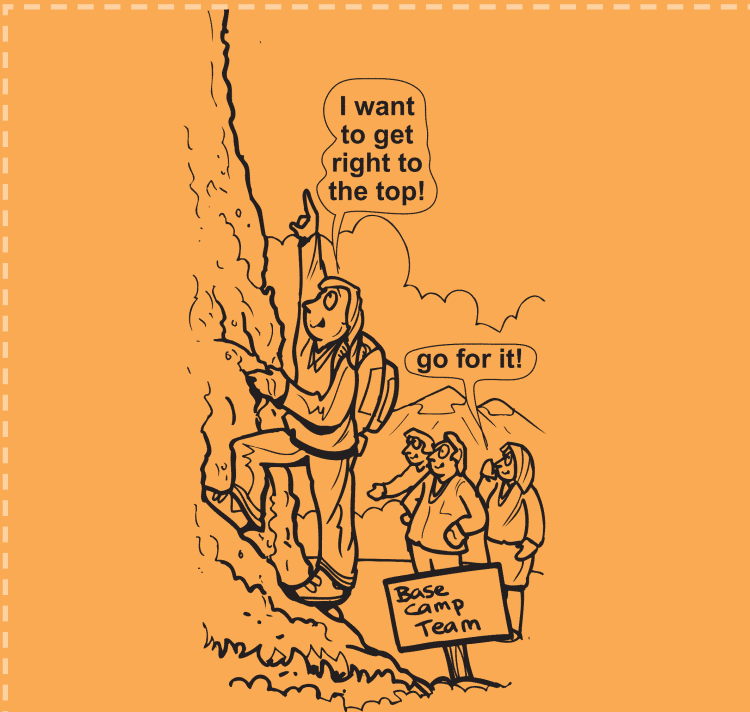
No booklet could provide a comprehensive overview of everything you would need to know and consider as you ponder a future research career. Nor could it provide details of all the people and organisations who potentially could pave the way for you to take appropriate research training. The booklet can only focus on some of the key issues and point you in the direction of information and support to help you make the right choices for you.

Linked to this booklet, however, is an online resource that will enable you to access much more of the detail you will need to help you reach your decisions.

The website, which can be found at: **www.nes.scot.nhs.uk**, is a developing resource that offers a wealth of information and advice for aspiring researchers. It contains links to:

- information on research consortia in Scotland (see page 8), with links to HEIs in Scotland that show their areas of research interest/expertise, key contacts and entry requirements for postgraduate research training
- descriptions of the research process and information about opportunities for nurses, midwives and AHPs to engage with the process within consortia
- a guide to research governance frameworks
- information on postdoctoral research opportunities
- Chief Scientist Office fellowship opportunities
- opportunities from the Health Foundation
- research ethics committees
- research interest groups, such as the Royal College of Nursing Research Society
- contact details of some clinical experts within managed clinical networks in Scotland
- results of the most recent research assessment exercise (RAE).

To take full advantage of the website, log on to **www.nes.scot.nhs.uk** and follow the instructions, which will guide you to the site.



'For those of you starting out now – give it a go, aim high and you might just succeed. Make sure you have a good team of researchers/supervisors behind you. And, as the ad says – just do it!'

Marlis Bunyan (nurse lecturer and CSO fellow)

3. how have we got here?

It's fair to say that there has been a lot of activity on the research front in Scotland in recent years.

The strategy for research and development in nursing and midwifery for Scotland, *Choices and Challenges*,¹ was published in March 2002. The strategy identified nursing and midwifery research as a core contributor to the achievement of the Scottish Executive's plans for a healthy, caring Scotland.

Two key elements were central to the strategy: research consortia, and clinical/academic career pathways.

*Research consortia** were seen as offering opportunities to develop a critical mass of skilled researchers capable of contributing to focused programmes of research. They would create a learning environment in which novice researchers could be nurtured.

Clinical/academic career pathways were defined as the key platform for the future development of nursing and midwifery research in Scotland. They would be based on high-quality research training at different career stages and would allow the nurse or midwife to maintain involvement in clinical practice through the creation of sustainable clinical/academic posts.

We now have three research consortia in Scotland, focused on combining the skills and experience of a range of institutions in devising planned programmes of research that aim to meet NHSScotland's agenda.

*In the *Choices and Challenges* strategy document, these are referred to as research alliances. The term research consortia was adopted after the publication of the strategy.



'The world of the practising midwife and the research midwife are as similar as they are different. I would wholeheartedly encourage my hospital and community-based colleagues to take up research opportunities should they arise.'

Maggie Styles (midwife and research assistant)

And clinical/academic career pathway models are being developed with ongoing work looking at ways to adapt career pathways to fit the needs of the professions, particularly in the context of Agenda for Change and the NHS pay modernisation agenda.

The allied health professions in Scotland took much encouragement from the development of *Choices and Challenges* and could see in it the germ seed of their own plans for fostering research and

development. The subsequent *Allied Health Professions Research and Development Action Plan*,² produced following a nation-wide consultation which identified research and development as a key priority for AHPs, built on the work undertaken to develop *Choices and Challenges* to address common issues of capacity and capability. It also focused on the need for a more robust evidence base to underpin professional interventions.

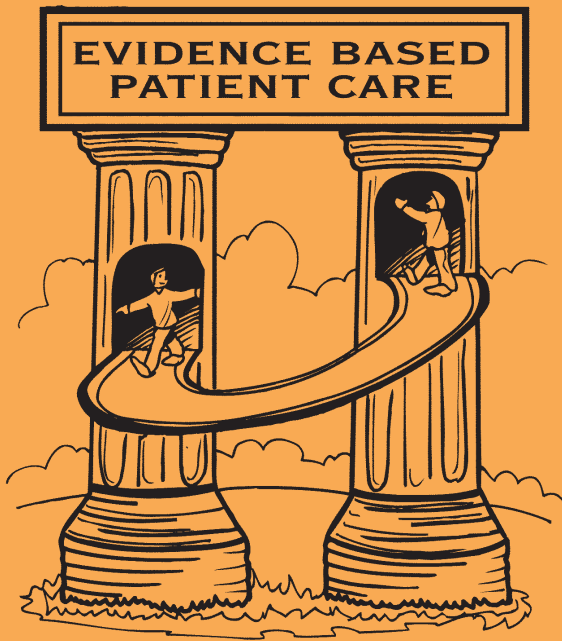
AHPs in Scotland have also built an extensive and very active clinical effectiveness and practice development forum (see: www.nhsscotland.com/cesahp/), supported by the NHS Quality Improvement Scotland Practice Development Unit. The forum has blossomed in the wake of the AHP clinical effectiveness project,³ which focused on co-ordinating and evaluating clinical effectiveness support mechanisms for AHPs throughout the country.

Each of these documents and initiatives ties in with the national research strategy for NHSScotland, *Research Strategy for Health and Healthcare*,⁴ published by the Chief Scientist Office in July 2003. The strategy identified building capacity in nursing, midwifery and AHP research as one of the priorities for the next five years.

There is much more that has happened as a consequence of (and, indeed, as a precursor to) these strategies, action plans and initiatives. All in all, it adds up to a very favourable climate for nurses, midwives and AHPs who are interested in developing their potential as researchers.

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1. Scottish Executive Health Department (2002) *Choices and Challenges: the strategy for research and development in nursing and midwifery in Scotland*. Edinburgh: SEHD.
2. Scottish Executive Health Department (2004) *Allied Health Professions Research and Development Action Plan*. Edinburgh: SEHD.



'It's not leaving nursing – see it as nursing that has an impact at a different level, and value it for what it can contribute to patient care in a different way.'

Joyce Wilkinson (primary care nurse and PhD student)

3. Holdsworth L, Blair V. (2004) *The Development and Evaluation of Local and National Mechanisms to Facilitate the Integration of Clinical Effectiveness within the Allied Health Professions (Professions Allied to Medicine)*. Edinburgh: NHS QIS.
4. Chief Scientist Office (2003) *Research Strategy for Health and Healthcare*. Edinburgh: The Stationery Office.

4. where do I start?

It's the question many people in similar situations to yourself will ask, and it is a crucial one to get right.

Some people become disillusioned when they pitch themselves into the research stream at the wrong level and quickly find they are out of their depth. Don't allow that to happen to you.

The place to start is by asking yourself some questions that relate to **you**, to the **research** you are interested in pursuing, and to the **support** you might be able to access.

YOU

Are you:

- a registered nurse/midwife/AHP?
- experienced in your area of work?
- qualified to (at least) first-degree level?
- a self-starter?
- a team-worker?
- able to identify short and long-term aims?
- focused on outcomes?
- committed to service improvement?
- knowledgeable about the system within which you work?
- able to see the links between research, education and practice?
- committed to developing a practice-based research career?

If you can say 'yes' to all or most of these, you're already on your way...

In addition, have you considered the following:

- How deep is your interest in research? There is a number of different 'levels' of research engagement¹ – how far do you

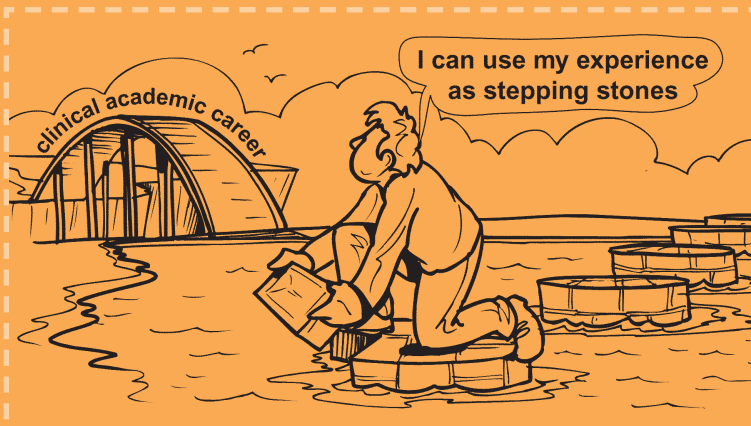
want to go? Do you wish to be a consumer of research with perhaps occasional involvement in a project, or are you bent on a research career with the potential to prepare you to be a leader of research programmes? If it's the latter, you should be thinking about training to PhD level, or taking postdoctoral studies.

- How will working on your PhD or postdoctoral project affect your terms and conditions of employment?
- What work opportunities might be available to you on completion of your studies?

RESEARCH

Is your proposed area of research interest:

- relevant to meeting the health needs of the people of Scotland?
- linked to the work of NHSScotland or your employing agency?



'Looking back through my career to date, I can see how, through a variety of projects, I have moved from being a clinical collaborator, to a research worker, to an investigator. My current position as a postdoctoral research fellow enables me to build on this and develop as a principal researcher in externally funded research.'

Eddie Duncan (clinical specialist occupational therapist and postdoctoral research fellow)

- related to your own area of clinical practice expertise?
- complementary to the research portfolio of a particular research consortium or HEI and the local NHSScotland research agenda?
- amenable to being addressed by an accepted, validated or trustworthy research method?
- liable to raise any ethical issues – for instance, are you planning to conduct research with vulnerable patient/client groups?

SUPPORT

Do you have:

- the possibility of employer support for pursuing research training?
- access to advice from experienced researchers and experts within your clinical field to help you develop a good, clear research question?
- access to a research centre with a good track record in your area of interest, either within an established consortium or in a particular HEI?
- reliable mentors/supervisors in your place of work and chosen research centre?
- a reasonable idea of the probable costs of the project and access to potential funding support?
- a firm schedule for the development of your research?
- access to resources (people, libraries, internet, etc.)?

Reference

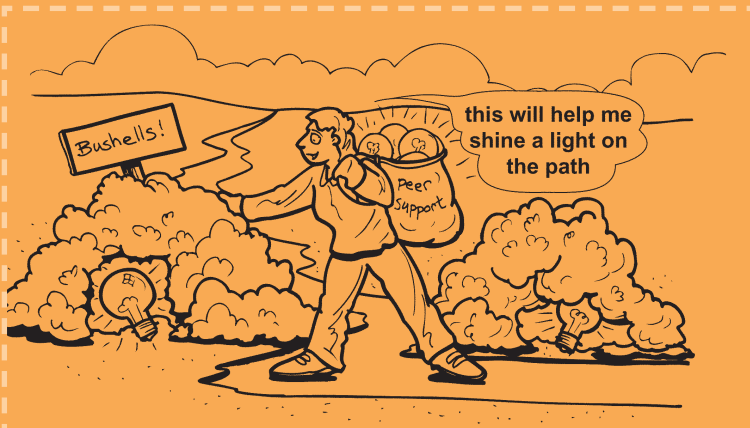
1. Scottish Executive Health Department (2002) *Choices and Challenges: the strategy for research and development in nursing and midwifery in Scotland*. Edinburgh: SEHD.

5. getting the answers...

Having asked all of the questions in the previous section, you will probably find that you can say 'yes' to some, 'no' to a few, and 'not sure' to others. This section will hopefully give you some ideas on how you can turn 'no' and 'not sure' into 'yes'.

YOU

Apart from making sure you have sufficient experience in your area of practice, are enthusiastic about the potential of research to improve services and are qualified to the appropriate professional and academic levels, what else can you do to prepare yourself for taking on research training?



'Don't underestimate the importance of peer support – be active in seeking it out.'

Jacquelyn Chaplin (palliative care nurse and PhD student)



'Developing expertise in your specialist subject area and in research and development activities comes through practical experience, collaboration and joint working with other professionals, reading the literature and listening to patients. But don't start any project without consulting service users first. They will be your best guide to what needs to be done and how they might respond to your efforts.'

Anne Whittaker (mental health nurse and PhD student)

Once you have refined your thinking about what you want to do and how, the following will help you move forward.

- Use the linked website – **www.nes.scot.nhs.uk** – to identify someone within a research consortium or HEI with whom you can discuss your ideas and plans. Be bold, and go for the best person in the field. That can seem a bit intimidating, but it is vital to get the most authoritative advice possible at this stage of your research career – the decisions you make at this point will impact on everything else you do thereafter, so base them on the best possible advice.

- Think very seriously about the potential benefits of the research for your own development and the development of the service in which you work. Speak to your manager, mentor or supervisor – ask him or her to tell you how he or she thinks your research training would boost the service. And open negotiations on what kinds of job opportunities might be available to you during and after your research training.
- Work through with your colleagues, family and friends the implications of taking on study at PhD or postdoctoral level. It's a big undertaking that is bound to have an impact on your professional and social life. Speak to someone who has been over the course before. You may already be aware of a PhD-qualified or postdoctoral researcher in your field you can talk to; if not, contact an HEI with a particular interest in your chosen area of research (see the linked website – www.nes.scot.nhs.uk – for details).

RESEARCH

Developing your research question is a process that takes place over time, and doesn't happen overnight. It is subject to a number of influences, including advice from experienced contacts. When developing your research question:

- base the question in problems and issues experienced in, or related to, your clinical practice
- establish precisely what you want to find out, and why it's important that you do so
- find out what is already known about the question that interests you
- seek out research seminars and other opportunities to meet people, develop networks and refine your thinking about the question
- consider an appropriate 'match' of research question and proposed research methodology and methods
- share what you plan to do with a critical audience – an experienced researcher in a consortium or HEI, a respected clinician and a senior manager in your workplace, for instance – and keep them posted on your progress.



'My experience [of doing a PhD while still employed in NHSScotland] has been really positive to date... You don't have to be an expert in your field or in research methods to carry out a research project, or apply to do a PhD. There are training opportunities and many experts you can collaborate with.'

Kay Cooper (physiotherapist and PhD student)

When considering a HEI to approach, look for those that offer:

- opportunities for high-quality research training
- an established research ethos and culture with experienced research leaders from across the professions who have an interest in your area of clinical expertise
- excellent arrangements for supervision and mentorship
- research interest that builds into a strong body of expertise and knowledge
- understanding of the importance of collaborative working across departments and with other key stakeholders, particularly NHSScotland
- possibilities for further study at postdoctoral level.

SUPPORT

Support from a variety of sources will be crucial in helping you see your research training through to a successful conclusion. You will need to secure support from the following.

- Family and friends. The PhD or postdoctoral studies route can be a lonely one at times, and you will benefit from the support of family and friends who have been prepared in advance to understand the challenges you face.
- A HEI with the requisite levels of research experience and interest to support you through high-quality supervision and training. You'll find a lot of information about the qualities and areas of research interest of Scottish HEIs on the linked website (www.nes.scot.nhs.uk), and you can arrange for informal visits or conversations with senior personnel.
- Your employers. They will be crucial not only in providing you with financial and moral support, but will also be instrumental in helping to disseminate the results of your research and translating them into changes in practice at clinical level. Your manager or supervisor would be the right person to approach in the first instance.
- Experts who are experienced in the area you are researching, both in clinical and academic settings, who can act as advisors and mentors. The websites of HEIs tend to offer information about the research interests of individual members of staff. Trace their published papers and assess how relevant they are to your area of interest. The linked website offers more information to assist you in your search.
- Research consortia, research centres, research networks and special interest groups that have a particular focus on your area. Your employing organisation, royal college, professional organisation or trade union may also be able to provide support, particularly through access to resources such as special interest groups, research interest groups and journal clubs.
- Patient support and voluntary organisations who may be interested in your research. These organisations are generally very keen to promote relevant research that will be of benefit to their constituent groups.
- Sources of potential funding to support your training and provide ongoing income. The linked website – www.nes.scot.nhs.uk – will help you access sites that have up-to-date information on potential funding sources to support research across a range of topic areas. Your local NHS Board and HEI may also be able to advise.

6. what should I do next?

The key thing now is to follow your hopes and aspirations, stay focused on the task, and don't listen to cynics who tell you it can't be done!

All of the researchers you know and admire have, at some point in their careers, been in exactly the same position as you are now. And each one of them will readily acknowledge that they couldn't have attained what they have achieved without the support, encouragement and advice of many people, in particular experienced fellow-researchers.

The clinical research career route isn't an easy option, and you will face many exacting challenges. But it's a choice that gives you the opportunity to be involved in exciting, varied and stimulating work, and ultimately gives you the satisfaction of knowing that you are making a vital contribution to the development of quality services for patients and clients.

So, the message is:

- **THINK IT THROUGH**
- **TALK IT THROUGH**
- **SEE IT THROUGH!**

And remember, you can access more information on the linked website: go to **www.nes.scot.nhs.uk** and follow the instructions, which will guide you to the site.

Good luck!



'Don't sit back and wait for things to happen – follow your dreams and, above all, get out there and make the world know that you have arrived!'

Ginny Henderson (neonatal nurse and PhD student)

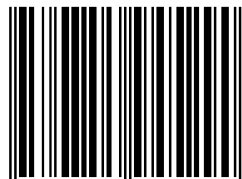
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