

Enabling the research pillar of advanced practice

Research, as an integral part of advanced practice, is the key ethos of the research pillar in the Multi-professional framework for advanced clinical practice in England (Health Education England (HEE), 2017). The HEE's Centre for Advancing Practice is developing an increased focus on the research pillar, to increase the representation of advanced practice research of all types across multiple disciplines throughout the international community.

Engagement in research is encouraged and flexibly supported across a full range of research activities. Such efforts enable advanced practitioners to: instigate and evaluate quality improvement initiatives; become members of research teams; contribute to research conferences; co-author and author research papers; apply for funded research; act as principal investigators for research studies; and become clinical doctoral fellows.

As part of fostering research prospects for advanced practitioners, the Centre supports an annual advanced practice conference, which has a strong and growing research focus. The Centre and its associated regional faculties for advancing practice also promote the valuable contribution of advanced practitioners to the development of the national research agenda. The agenda allows advanced practitioners to become the future leaders of research activities, such as via the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) award pathways, for which advanced practitioners have been sponsored to complete. The NIHR award pathway has been previously reported in this journal (Dean, 2023).

The Multi-professional framework for advanced clinical practice in England (Health Education England, 2017), and more recently the Multi-professional consultant-level practice capability and impact framework (NHS England, 2023) both articulate the expected core capabilities spanning all four pillars of practice in advancing practice—including the expected integration of the research pillar—and describe the development into the consultant level of practice for research and innovation.

Research and its associated perspectives are not just the Centre for Advancing Practice's agenda; the concept of making research every clinician's business and part of everyday practice for all clinicians and stakeholders across the health and care system is a core part of the NIHR's strategy (Royal College of Physicians and NIHR, 2022). Similar messages for research as an embedded, commonplace activity of practitioner's working lives can be found in the NHS long term plan (NHS, 2019), NHS long term workforce plan (NHS, 2023a) and associated strategic plans for healthcare research across multi-professional perspectives (NHS, 2021; 2023b; 2023c; Department of Health and Social Care, 2022; Health Education England, 2022), which all set out visions and directions for accelerating transformational change in the research and innovation culture. Such efforts demonstrate the high level of commitment towards supporting the different members of the healthcare workforce across nursing, midwifery, allied health, and pharmacy to embed research into healthcare services. Furthermore, the NIHR seeks

to support the contribution of healthcare and social care professionals in the delivery of high-quality research-based care by inspiring them to improve health outcomes through research and quality improvement, guided by structured career development and training for research, such as that offered by the NIHR Academy (NIHR, 2023a).

Within an advanced practice context, while existing landmark research has long since established the efficacy and safety of multi-professional advanced practitioner roles (Spitzer et al, 1974; 1990; Horrocks, 2002; McPherson et al, 2006; Desmeules, 2012), the focus for research now needs to be on the impact of more recent innovations in advanced practice. These innovations are aimed at improving and transforming services offered by health and social care providers for patients, families and carers; they have been delivered by an established workforce of advanced practitioners deployed across such services.

We are moving into a new era of multi-professional care for patients, where different types of clinicians working in teams are involved in coordinating and delivering care, such as doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, pharmacists, biomedical scientists and practitioner psychologists. The members of these teams all contribute discretely different experiences, knowledge and skills to collaborate on enhancing outcomes for their patients.

However, so often, although not exclusively, senior medical colleagues are seen as the de facto leaders of such multi-professional teams, with a resultant focus on medically-oriented research in many healthcare settings (above and beyond research emanating from other health and care professions). We need more practice-based research, which is led by those other professions, that recognises the different contributions of discrete healthcare professions to patient care. It is important that such contributions simultaneously: appreciate their integration of practice-based research into multi-professional teams; understand the impact of interdisciplinary ways of working, such as advanced practice, on expediting access to care; and optimise patient experiences and outcomes.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a UK-wide cross-sectional survey was conducted of approximately 4400 advanced practitioners to analyse aspects of their roles (Fothergill, 2022). The survey findings noted there was a widely held belief that the four pillars of advanced practice were integral to working effectively in advanced practitioner roles. Only 11% of the advanced practitioner survey respondents reported that they were involved in research. Dissemination of research findings was usually within provider organisations, with a minority of the surveyed advanced practitioners using national or international means of public dissemination. The research pillar was seen as a neglected area of focus, with

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only 0.5% of primary care trusts stating it was a priority. A further challenge highlighted included committing time to work across the four pillars of advanced practice, particularly the research pillar. While a post-pandemic follow-up survey has not yet been undertaken, it is likely there has not been much change.

So, there is a great deal of work to be done to enable advanced practitioners to routinely be a part of a research culture on an integrated basis within their day-to-day working lives. Without active engagement across all four pillars of practice by advanced practitioners as their careers progress, including the research pillar, we will be unable to effectively drive the changes required to transform both the workforce and the services they deliver. Without such change, we will be unable to ensure safe, evidenced-based practice to support patients and patient pathways, strengthen the evidence base and inform service design, enable effective clinical reasoning and facilitate shared decision-making with the people and communities they work alongside. Therefore, creating such embedded research opportunities and empowering research career progression is essential, as it can also lead to greater job satisfaction and potentially better job retention for advanced practitioners.

More work needs to be done on mapping, addressing skill gaps and providing research mentorship for advanced practitioners. Consolidating collaborative links with academia and research organisations is key, such as the NIHR (2023b) Applied Research Collaborations and the NIHR (2023c) Clinical Research Network. Research career frameworks encourage health and social care professionals to play an active role in research, as a way to deliver better services. These frameworks enable research career progression for advanced practitioners from all disciplinary backgrounds to take advantage of the multiple routes for career progression, such as transitioning to consultant level, or via the NIHR research career pathways.

Engagement with research can start with relatively simple steps, such as journal clubs. For example, in the first full edition of this journal, Polak and Allan (2023) highlighted how a modified journal club, using an online and accessible learning resource, being advanced-practitioner-led (with advanced practitioner participants and presenters), could alter perceptions about research and encourage active engagement. Further confidence in research can be gained through engagement in quality-improvement innovations for identifying and solving problems in the delivery of care; such an applied usage of advanced practice skills and knowledge can make a positive difference in the care that patients receive.

It was a specific intention to publish abstracts from the Centre's advanced practice conference in the preliminary edition of this journal. A published abstract is often the first step a clinician will take on their research publication journey. This journal also provides a platform for research for advanced practice across all disciplines and across the international community. The Centre for Advancing Practice and the editors of this journal very much look forward to reading your submitted research papers for peer review, and we strongly encourage you to use this specific platform for dissemination and discussion of advanced practice research and quality-improvement projects, among our community and beyond. **IJAP**

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