

Transcript for Podcast 1: How to get involved in research

Chapter 2: Research types

Tony Smith, podcast host

Hello, and welcome back to our podcast series for rheumatology pharmacists. In this second chapter, we talk about different types of research. I'm Tony Smith, and I'm here today with Lewis Sutherland, a senior clinical pharmacist. Hi Lewis. So, in terms of types of research, what type of research have you been involved in?

Lewis Sutherland, Senior Clinical Pharmacist

So, several different types, mostly I guess at this stage local level. So, audits and quality improvement project work and things like that.

I did a bit of work recently looking at the issues and getting patients from the decision to start a new high-cost drug to then getting them timely to getting the medication delivered at their door. And many listeners will be aware that the home care plays a part in this alongside previous medicines they've been on, making sure the correct screening and bloods is involved.

So essentially came up with developing a new standard operating procedure and way of working to make sure no patients were missed. And we're going to be auditing that in the coming weeks to show does it work, does it not. And for any patients that fall outside of the treatment, the window to make this happen, identify why. So, it's sort of a living, breathing project at the minute.

And another big one that has just happened has been related to the COVID Medicines Delivery unit, where we have a pharmacist-lead model in Northumbria, which I'm quite involved in through I get to be the rheumatology pharmacist. A good proportion of the patients eligible for the medicines come from rheumatology, so I naturally slotted in to do a few slots at the start every week, and now we've got more people trained. It drifts in and out, so the main key learning points from that I presented at the British Society of Rheumatology Conference this year and thankfully it was very well received.

1:47 Tony

OK, and so what motivated you and interested you to get involved in that research that you were talking about?

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Lewis

It was seeing issues that were happening in incident reports and in patient complaints that have come in with regards to the timeliness of the medication. And then trying to think why is this happening, where are the current delays and where can we make changes that are going to improve it.

At the end of the day, it's a case of wanting the best patient care is the motivator and seeing the opportunity to do something about it and to make a positive difference.

2:25 Tony

I mean, that's amazing to hear Lewis, so it strikes me that what I'm hearing is that motivation that we were speaking about earlier really showing through in terms of the benefits for the patients and your desire to help them.

Lewis

Yes, and I think we're all very aware that in many walks of life at the minute for various different reasons, capacity is a struggle.

And it's more important than ever to find new ways of working and new innovation and efficiency with different processes.

2:57 Tony

And so, how would you summarize your experience in research?

Lewis

I think rewarding is probably the best word to use.

I think when you develop something new and it works and you get good feedback about it, it feels very good and what's also useful is when you get involved in a project that you think is going to be great and it doesn't work as well. And taking learning points from that and not just learning yourself but sharing with other people.

3:27 Tony

And in terms of some of the types of research, for example academic and commercial research, what are the differences that you see between those two?

Lewis

The main difference, I guess if you want a word is money/funding.

So, academic is usually new discoveries or someone who's got an interest who wants to find out a question, but it's usually in a medicine or an area that is already available and it will be for the benefit of the scientific community and more a case of "Right, I've done this, but I want to know is it actually objectively the right thing to do?"

You will then also have commercial, which tends to be looking at a research area that, and again this is not exclusive, this is a real generalisation, looking at a new drug or a treatment already established being used in a therapeutic area that isn't currently used in, to trying to say, can we find something else for these patients who are struggling?

And it can be very important for health policy decisions and things like that.

4:33 Tony

And Lewis, what are the pros and cons of both?

Lewis

I would argue they both share the common pro of finding out something you didn't know before, and you know if it works or if it doesn't.

I think the benefits of commercial will really depend on the site involved. You can't deny that commercial studies bring funding and funding can be quite crucial to patient care.

5:03 Tony

That's a great example. Can you give us any other examples of both the academic and commercial so we can understand that clearly.

Lewis

A commercial will realistically be quite commonly in new medicine, which is not currently in use for a particular disease state in the UK that has made it through. And I'm not going to go into the minutiae of the different stages of clinical trial development, but has made it through the pre steps into human use and they found a particular cohort of patients they want to use. And the site has made an application to be involved in this study and sort of decided that we'll finally put 50 patients at this hospital who meet the criteria and then they assess how does apparently patients get on compared to, usually, the current gold standard treatment at the time.

5:54 Tony

And when it comes to commercial research.

What's the pharmaceutical company's role?

Lewis

Usually, the development and funding of the study they usually take on a what's called the sponsor role. So, the sponsor will be the person who essentially bankrolls the research being done. Now, that isn't always a pharmaceutical company. That can be a charity, such as Cancer Research UK, who want to find out how can we better improve the care of these patients. And they might use some of the funding they get from donations and things to produce their own clinical trials, or it might be a new company or an existing company bringing in new medicine looking to bring it to market.

6:34 Tony

And how can you get involved in commercial research?

Lewis

The different ways you could apply to be the principal investigator for a particular study. So there will be clinical leads for each specialty within the clinical research network. And if you know who they are or can get in touch with them via the R&D department, you can, say, put your hat in the ring and say I have these credentials I'd like it to be involved in as a principal investigator at any studies you can think of that would be useful for me. And I guess in this, the important bit as a pharmacist, where the sponsor is happy for a pharmacist to be the principal investigator.

7:11 Tony

In terms of a good starting point then, what type of study would you say is a good place to get started to get into research and why.

Lewis

I don't think there's a particular gold standard. I think get cutting your teeth on a project is a great place to start. And getting the understanding of this is how we make something that works and is legacy. Because one of the big challenges in research, particularly from the quality improvement and service evaluation standpoints, is sustaining the change.

So, if you can get involved in quite a big project and learn what some experts that are involved there, it could be a transformation team, it could be particularly research experts, what they're actually doing to make sure that change is sustained. It can be invaluable.

If it's clinical trials. A lot of the time, if you're new into rheumatology, you will be swept in as a responsible pharmacist in a delegation log. And it will just be part of what you do, because you're involved in rheumatology, you are a pharmacist.

I would say the best study that you get involved in is one where you know who the PI is within your organization. You can develop a good relationship with them, and you can find time to potentially shadow what they do at the site visit, and what the research nurses do at site visits to get an understanding of how things work at your organisation.

8:47 Tony

Sure, so how can a pharmacist progress to getting involved with those randomized clinical trials?

Lewis

As with pretty much everything else involved in research just by speaking to the right people, which will be your R&D team and your CRM lead and things like this, there's very rarely a set pathway.

9:07 Tony

And what's the benefit of a pharmacist getting involved in that level of randomised trials? Or is there a benefit?

Lewis

The general benefits is: the more people that are research active and are involved, the more research you can do. And I think particularly now you might find that some clinicians who are more research active for one reason or another and different pressures, might not take on as many research responsibilities as they used to. And the NIHR are always very keen for other staff grades, and nurses and pharmacists to get involved because they've realised the benefit of having a wider pool and the benefits that different staff groups can bring.

9:49 Tony

What about the types of research that help improve service delivery?

Lewis

So those will usually be local level projects, where you identify something which isn't working as well as it could. There will be many local conferences available, like in the Northeast we have the Great North Pharmacy Research Collaborative, where any work that's been done by a pharmacist in quality improvement service evaluation, clinical trial work can be presented and be seen by colleagues in the locale.

10:20 Tony

Thank you for listening in. We'll get back to you soon. And in the next, final chapter, we give you tools on how to get started.

Abbreviations:

CRM, clinical research manager; NIHR, National Institute for Health and Care Research