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Tips for Allied Health Professionals to Successfully Engage with Research: A commentary

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Tips for Allied Health Professionals to Successfully Engage with Research: A Commentary

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ABSTRACT

While allied health professionals are encouraged to engage in research, there are numerous challenges to do so in practice. In this commentary, we reflect on some of these challenges and provide some simple tips on strategies that can be used by allied health professionals to overcome these challenges. These tips may provide a starting point for allied health professionals to successfully engage with research.

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher at University of South Australia, I engage with students from several allied health disciplines including physiotherapy (physical therapy), occupational therapy, podiatry, medical radiations, health science, clinical exercise physiology, and human movement, just to name a few. One of my slides in the first lecture for these students is about the importance of being a critically reflective practitioner when they become part of the allied health workforce. I emphasize that the clinical landscape is constantly evolving, and as a result, health care professionals are expected to keep up to date with current knowledge, employing evidenced-based practice based on conscientious and judicious decisions on what is current best evidence and how it can be integrated into clinical practice. Some students nod their heads in agreement, some students have a curious look which may imply “*Will this be on the exam?*”, while the rest busily interact with their mobile devices. As the lecture concludes, I know that there will be more opportunities for me to hone this message to the student cohort and we all leave.

COMMON BARRIERS TO ENGAGING WITH RESEARCH

Recently though, I had the opportunity to participate in several workshops with practising allied health professionals. In a workshop that I was facilitating, we were discussing strategies on how best to implement best practice for a common clinical condition that affects millions of people worldwide. In another workshop, in which I was a participant, we were being trained in accessing and synthesising best evidence for implementation in clinical practice. While the focus of these two workshops was completely different, the issues that were raised by the participating allied health professionals were strikingly similar. These issues essentially revolved around barriers to successfully engaging with research. While allied health professionals acknowledged the importance of engaging with research (i.e. they had every intention to do so), they also highlighted numerous barriers to such engagement (i.e. their behaviour did not match this). This “intention-behaviour” gap has been well acknowledged in the literature.¹⁻³

So, what were the common barriers to successful engaging with research? There were several, including but not limited to

- *Time* - with the increasing demand to provide safe, effective, efficient, equitable, timely service and to meet increasing demand, most allied health professionals struggle to find protected, uninterrupted time to engage with research (such as developing research ideas, reading publications or accumulation of data and publication of papers);
- *Resources* – lack of adequate and dedicated resources to assist allied health professionals to engage with research. This might include lack of infrastructure resources (such as dedicated information technology, access to relevant databases), human resources (such as lack of mentors and dedicated support for specialised tasks such as undertaking and interpreting statistics) and financial resources (such as access to funds to attend professional development sessions);
- *Expertise and confidence* – allied health professionals may feel intimidated by their lack of research skills and how to go about it, such as the processes, resources required, expertise needed and ethical requirements to engage with research. For example, previous research indicates that inability to understand statistical analysis as one of the critical barriers that confront allied health professionals when engaging with research.^{4,5}
- *Mentorship* – lack of access to formal and informal mentorship programs and support to guide allied health professionals through their engagement with research. While there are some opportunities for training in the conduct, interpreting and application of research, allied health professionals also need support during the “doing” part as new issues, which were previously not thought of, may arise and require addressing.

As a teacher and researcher who has collaborated with allied health professionals from across the globe, I have heard these issues before. Not surprisingly, these issues were not new and I, along with other colleagues from Australia, from Brunei Darussalam and United Arab Emirates had previously reported on it.⁶⁻⁸ I also had the opportunity to hear about these issues first hand from a range of different allied health professionals during my recent visit to Brunei Darussalam. But the important question is, how do we tackle this?

SIMPLE TIPS AND STRATEGIES

During my time at Brunei Darussalam, we (local allied health professionals and I) had numerous opportunities to reflect on these issues. Firstly, it is important to recognise that successful engagement with and research by allied health professionals is a complex system-wide issue that need to be addressed accordingly. However, at the same time, there are also some simple tips and strategies that we have tried and tested at the coalface which has the potential to address some of these barriers.

- *TIP ONE – Undertake research which has a clinical focus* – While we all acknowledge the value of randomised controlled trials (RCT), undertaking a methodologically rigorous RCT is extremely time and resource intensive. Also, an RCT is only suited for a mature research question. Instead, allied health professionals could focus on research that helps to answer clinical issues that confront their everyday practice. This might be in the form of a clinical audit (as part of quality improvement), a descriptive cross-sectional study (in the form of a survey) and pilot studies (to establish feasibility and contextualise interventions to local environments). By undertaking such small-scale yet vitally relevant research, allied health professionals can get a taster for research, become familiar with the research process and start to build a foundation for future research.
- *TIP TWO– Partner with local academic institutions* – Academic institutions are looking to increase their engagement with clinical communities and demonstrate what they do has real implications at the coalface. This is a good opportunity for allied health professionals to partner with researchers and academics to develop research projects which can then be undertaken with Honours and Higher Degrees Research (such as Masters and PhD) students with allied health professionals acting as co-supervisors. This co-design is a “win-win” scenario as researchers have ready access to research topics, relevant population of interest, and opportunities for mentorship. This partnership will also mean allied health professionals can learn the intricacies of research by being part of the research team.
- *TIP THREE – Joint appointments* -Increasingly there is a move towards academic institutions and hospitals and health services working together to provide health services. As a result, there are increasing numbers of joint appointments between universities and hospitals/health services where the role is split between clinical practice and academia. Such roles too will provide opportunities to engage with and undertake research.
- *TIP FOUR – Committing to snack* - Waiting to have dedicated periods of time (e.g. half a day per week) to engage exclusively with research may never come to fruition due to competing clinical demands. Instead, allied health professionals may commit to short periods of time every day (e.g. half an hour/ an hour a day) for research purposes which may be more realistic and practical within their clinical contexts.

An hour a day, for example, over the course of a working week builds up to five hours, which in total is more than half a day of a working week committed to research. This snack approach can be used for developing research ideas, writing research papers, reviewing journals etc. As the saying goes “raindrops make a flood”, and over time committing to snack can result in tangible research outputs.

- **TIP FIVE – Building a research culture** – Research and clinical practice are not mutually exclusive activities and as allied health professionals, we need to engage with and value the role of research. However, to do this successfully, it is important that people actively discuss, want to engage with research and see this as part of their every day role. This will create a culture of research, where research is integrated within, and is a vital component of, everyday clinical practice.

CONCLUSION

The challenges that confront allied health professionals when engaging with research are numerous and persistent. While there no one single or simple solution to address all these challenges, it is important to develop, implement and test practical strategies to ameliorate these challenges. By following these tips, we believe allied health professionals can start to effectively engage with research.

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