THE ROLE OF A RESEARCH NURSE IN THE TORORO CHILD COHORT (TCC) STUDY-UGANDA

Introduction

I am a senior research nurse working with the Infectious Diseases Research Collaboration (IDRC), a research institution based in Uganda and majoring in clinical trials of infectious diseases such as HIV, Malaria and Tuberculosis. I have worked as a research nurse in this institution for over five years; and among other duties, I supervise research nurses and also participate in research activities.

In this essay, I will elaborate on the role of a research nurse, with a particular focus on research nurses in low income contexts, basing on my experience while working on the Tororo Child Cohort study. I will describe the roles and responsibilities of research nurses, explain some of the challenges faced and discuss possible supportive measures to enable research nurses get more involved in clinical research.

The Tororo Child Cohort (TCC) study

The TCC study was conducted in one of IDRC’s research sites in eastern Uganda. This study aimed to establish the interaction between Malaria and HIV among HIV positive and HIV Negative African children of two to five years old. The study took place from 2005 until 2012.

Having participated in the TCC study as a research nurse supervisor as well as a research nurse, I have been able to learn more about the responsibilities and challenges of this role.

The research nurse’s role in clinical research

In recent years, there has been an increase in clinical trials conducted worldwide (Spilsbury, Petherick, Cullum et al., 2008), resulting from the increased prevalence of diseases such as HIV, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and this has resulted in more nurses joining clinical research.

According to Clinical Research Nurse (CRN) Model of Care (2010), the role of research nurses is very essential in contributing to the ethical conduct of clinical research. Like in clinical care, research nurses interact more frequently and more freely with participants than other research staff, which enables them to address the research participants’ various needs, and to ensure that participants understand the research they participate in. This helps in achieving the ultimate goal of the research nurses’ role, which is to provide a high standard of care to research participants, to ensure their safety, and collection of quality data.
In the TCC study, research nurses were engaged in diverse roles and responsibilities including; recruitment of study participants, assisting in informed consent, randomisation of participants, administering study and non-study medications, offering nursing care to participants, monitoring for drug reactions, counselling and support of research participants and their caretakers, and study termination.

As can be observed, research nurses contribute to almost all the research process. Nonetheless, the advanced roles such as writing research proposals, study coordination, and publications have not been even attempted in my setting. This is likely to be the case for most other low income countries. In contrast, research nurses in developed countries seem to perform more advanced roles. This was evidenced by the information I collected during two placement visits to two recognised UK research institutions, which revealed that UK research nurses are involved in a range of other research roles such as research coordination and publications. Considering that the demand for research in low income settings is increasing, research nurses in these settings will require support to become more involved and perform more research roles.

**Challenges faced by research nurses**

A number of challenges have been identified to face research nurses. According to Stephens-Lloyd (2004), these include lack of confidence, role conflict as researcher and nurse, poor cooperation with other staff, lack of adequate training and lack of motivation.

In my practice, the critical challenges observed include lack of adequate educational/professional preparation, and lack of research involvement and recognition by other research colleagues. For example, majority of research nurses are diploma and certificate holders, yet they resume their duties with no induction program and have no on-job trainings or mentorship to support them in their role. Additionally, research nurses’ contributions in research are hardly recognised as they are not always included in publications or given opportunities to present in conferences.

Although these problems may be experienced both in low and high income settings, they seem to be more pronounced in low income settings. For example in the UK, research nurses work more autonomously, receive induction and refresher trainings, and receive regular on job mentoring and support (information got from a placement visit). Support is required to uplift the role of research nurses in low income settings.
Supporting research nurses to be more involved in clinical research

Research nurses require adequate support to meet the demands of their complex and challenging role. Firstly, the training needs for research nurses in low income settings could be met by including components of research in the nursing curriculum at lower levels of training such as diploma, undertaking induction programs, and initiating on-job training and mentoring in research institutions. These innovations will enhance the knowledge and skills of research nurses and will improve their performance.

Secondly, research nurses should be recognised by their colleagues as partners in research rather than being taken as lower cadres. This can be achieved by giving them opportunities to take on more roles such as research coordination, publication, and presenting in conferences. This will act as a motivation and will improve their contribution in research.

Furthermore, nurses should be motivated to initiate research projects based on nursing issues identified in practice. This will enable them to work more autonomously and will contribute to the body of nursing knowledge as a whole.

Summary

Research nurses especially in low income settings still experience significant challenges in performing their role, such as being less involved and less recognised in research studies as observed in the Tororo Child Cohort study, in Uganda. Manley (1997) recognises research as a critical element in nursing practice, intended to improve the quality of patient care. Therefore research nurses should be encouraged and supported to develop skills for conducting research, disseminating research findings, and integrating evidence into care.
References


