

Developing occupational therapy clinical research partnerships

Jo Adams and **Kirsty Bancroft** reflect on their team working experiences of designing, developing and recruiting for nationally funded OT research projects

Getting involved with research studies that have been funded by external bodies and are NHS portfolio adopted is an excellent route to ensure that as a clinical collaborator you are joining robust, high quality studies that are deemed to be of national importance.

The Strengthening and Stretching for Rheumatoid Arthritis of the Hand (SARAH) trial and OTTER are two such trials that have developed essential effective research links between OT clinicians and academic researchers.

Jo and Kirsty have been involved in both of these studies, but from a different OT perspective; Jo as an OT academic and Kirsty as an OT clinical collaborator and local NHS principle investigator.

Jo sees her role – chief investigator – as initially working alongside clinical and patient colleagues in identifying a research question that is likely to answer important clinical questions and also attract funding for the project to be conducted.

Once the tricky aspect of securing grant funding has been achieved Jo's role will then change to become one that operationalises and co-ordinates the research project, usually across many health care sites.

The first task will be to recruit research fellow staff to work alongside the research team; an exciting stage, as often this means that staff are recruited who may be new to OT practice, but will always bring relevant experience and perspective to the research project.

Once the grant is underway, Jo's role can include supporting clinical colleagues in understanding trial procedures, encouraging clinical collaborators to recruit to target and maintain the trial procedures in practice.

When all the data collection is done, then it is the academics' turn to work alongside statisticians and health economists in analysing the final data.

Jo reflects that from an academic's point of view these projects cannot even be contemplated without the support, enthusiasm and goodwill of clinical collaborators. It is important that when designing and developing research studies,

that there is representation of clinical partners to ensure that the research projects produced are feasible, practical and reflect a rapidly changing service environment.

Many OT clinicians are keen to contribute to research, learn new skills relating to research governance and ethics, and contribute to authoring research publications. Joining a research team can give the opportunity to learn new skills, join UK teams and gain further CPD opportunities.

From a clinician's point of view, Kirsty has been involved in research at both local and national levels, initially getting involved by becoming an expert reviewer for the Arthritis Research UK booklets.

This gave her a stepping-stone and the confidence to move onto other areas of research. At Poole Hospital, Kirsty has been involved in recruiting for both the SARAH and OTTER trials. Kirsty was the lead treating therapist for the SARAH trial and, having gained the skills in this area, moved onto becoming the principal investigator at Poole for the OTTER trial.

'Being involved in these trials has cemented our relationship and links with our NHS research department,' Kirsty explains. 'We have a better understanding of the research process and trust wide our colleagues are now aware of our skills in clinical research.'

From engaging in these studies, Kirsty feels that she has gained an increased knowledge of the research process, more confidence in her clinical and managerial skills, development of organisational skills, experience of running a project in the clinical environment, and 'doors appear to be opening' with regards to being involved in other projects.

'This really keeps the brain stimulated and CPD activities updated.' As a principal investigator, Kirsty was required to do Good Clinical Practice (GCP) training, which gave the foundation knowledge of running a research study and complying with research



regulations; this was a new learning opportunity for anyone involved in clinical practice.

'The benefits of getting involved are not just at a personal level, but also trust wide,' she says. 'As with taking on any extra work in an environment where everyone is working at capacity, there are some practical challenges in taking part in research, such as time restraints, however the benefits seem to far outweigh the challenges.'

People can get involved in being a clinical research collaborator and principal investigator through making links with academic institutions and allied health academics, who will help form relationships and guide you through the process.

There are also opportunities through the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) to contribute and develop further insight into evidence-based OT interventions. For example, Kirsty was recently successful in being appointed a co-opted expert OT for the Nice guidelines review of osteoarthritis.

'We really would encourage getting involved with portfolio adopted OT research projects. It is so important to do OT clinical research, because as academics and clinicians we are able to influence how research findings can be implemented into clinical practice and to be involved in that evidence based practice from both an academic and clinical point of view is exciting.'

● **Jo Adams**, academic OT and senior lecturer at the University of Southampton, and **Kirsty Bancroft**, a senior clinical OT at Poole General Hospital. For more information on the OTTER trial visit: www.arthritisresearchuk.org/research/grant-tracker-items/2011/the-start-trial--assessing-the-effectiveness-of-splints-in-thumb-osteoarthritis.aspx and the SARAH trial visit: www.hta.ac.uk/project/1721.asp