
THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF RESEARCH MIDWIVES: SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

In the pursuit of providing women with the most current evidence-based care, high-quality research becomes paramount. Midwives, being uniquely positioned to understand the needs of pregnant women, can play a vital role in multidisciplinary research teams. They possess a range of skills essential for research, making them invaluable contributors. The role of a research midwife encompasses diverse responsibilities such as study design, participant recruitment and consent, data collection and analysis, as well as result dissemination. Engaging in this role not only allows midwives to refine existing skills but also presents ample opportunities for acquiring new ones. The experience gained as research midwives can pave the way for a gratifying career in research or significantly enhance their clinical practice.

Keywords: *midwife,*

INTRODUCTION

The field of healthcare research holds significant financial value, with a health research budget of £1.025 billion in 2010–2011 (Department of Health, 2010). The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) code of practice emphasizes the delivery of care based on the best available evidence or best practice (NMC, 2008). Not too long ago, it was common practice for all low-risk women to receive admission cardiotocography. However, research studies revealed that this practice increased the risk of instrumental delivery or cesarean section (Gourounti and Sandall, 2007). As a result, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines and day-to-day clinical practices were modified (NICE, 2007). To further enhance care and outcomes for women and their babies, continuous research and dissemination are imperative.

Research midwives play a critical role in ensuring that midwifery research remains focused on the needs of women. With their expertise in normal childbirth, midwives possess a unique understanding of and ability to meet the requirements of pregnant women (Sandall et al., 2010). They also comprehend the practical aspects of midwifery and the realities of conducting clinical research in such a setting. Unlike their non-clinical research counterparts, research midwives possess the invaluable benefit of recognizing the impact research can have on women and their families, extending beyond mere results.

Midwives hold the responsibility of maintaining sensitive communication with women throughout the continuum of pregnancy and labor, securing informed consent for various aspects of labor (Halldorsdottir and Karlsdottir, 2011). While 75% of Human Research Ethics Committees in Australia believed it was appropriate to obtain consent for research from women in labor (Reid et al., 2011), it is crucial to recognize pregnant women as a vulnerable group, allowing them ample time to provide consent and presenting

information in an easily understandable manner. Midwives' in-depth knowledge of their clientele enables them to tailor their communication approach, meeting individual needs based on factors such as age, culture, and educational level. Assessing the level of information each woman requires to provide informed consent is essential (Singh et al., 2002; Ledward, 2011).

Midwifery research often involves routine clinical procedures that midwives regularly perform as standard practice, including basic observations, venepuncture, vaginal examinations, and speculum examinations. Women are familiar with midwives conducting these procedures, making research appear routine and potentially enhancing their overall care (Pitchforth et al., 2009). Midwives' ability to build trusting relationships with women and empower them as advocates plays a significant role. This professional relationship fosters trust in midwives when it comes to healthcare decisions, which may encourage women to consider participating in research involving midwives (Bluff and Holloway, 1994). However, it is worth noting that many midwives feel they lack research skills, hindering their participation in research endeavors (Larsson et al., 2009).

The Role and Responsibilities of Research Midwives

Research midwives play a crucial role in various aspects of the research process. In certain research areas, they may be involved in study design, which can entail assisting or developing research proposals, securing appropriate ethics approvals, and, in some cases, prioritizing studies when funding is limited. Designing a study is typically undertaken by individuals in senior or experienced positions within clinical research, but it is a growing field within midwifery. Study design is influenced by the intended research outcomes. Quantitative research focused on clinical outcomes and treatment effectiveness may require randomized controlled trials, while qualitative research exploring people's experiences and emotions may utilize interviews to gather richer data. Regardless of the study design, ethical considerations and obtaining informed consent are fundamental aspects that must be addressed (Greaney et al., 2012).

Recruitment is a primary responsibility of research midwives. To ensure informed consent, women and their families need to be well-informed about the study they may be invited to participate in. Placing posters in locations frequented by the target group can educate staff, disseminate study information, provide support for participating women, and offer contact details for further inquiries. Depending on the research project, women may be recruited at various stages, such as early in pregnancy or post-delivery. Approaching women during labor or times of emotional stress requires careful consideration of their ability to provide informed consent. Sensitivity to their feelings and concerns regarding their pregnancy, particularly if they have a high-risk condition that makes them eligible for the research, is essential (e.g., studies on pre-eclampsia or intrauterine growth restriction). When individual women are approached to participate, they should receive sufficient information and ample time to make an informed decision. A minimum of 24 hours should be provided, although allowing up to 2 weeks is preferable (Ledward, 2011).

Data Collection and Maintaining Participant Engagement

Once women have been recruited for a study, the research midwife may be responsible for collecting the necessary samples or performing clinical assessments throughout their participation. This can involve tasks such as obtaining blood and swab samples or utilizing specialized analysis equipment. Some research midwives may also be involved in the preparation and processing of samples in a laboratory setting. Another method of data collection is through interviews with women, which can be conducted face-to-face, over the telephone, through written documentation and diaries, or via focus groups. Creating a safe and comfortable environment is essential for women to fully engage in the subject, and the research midwife must be skilled in various communication methods to ensure accurate and complete data collection.

Maintaining Contact and Consent

The duration of a woman's involvement in a research program can vary, requiring the research midwife to maintain regular contact through telephone calls, clinic visits, or home visits. While it is important for the research midwife to stay in touch with participants, it is equally vital that women feel comfortable reaching out to the researcher for support and advice. Approachability is a fundamental aspect of the midwife's role (Byrom and Downe, 2010), and women should feel confident in contacting the research midwife to express any concerns and withdraw from the study if they wish to do so.

Documentation

As with all aspects of midwifery, thorough documentation is crucial. From the initial contact to the completion of the research, contemporaneous record-keeping must be maintained as part of the research data trail and the woman's care package (Medical Research Council, 1998). This includes documenting performed tests, provided advice, and ongoing consent.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, research midwives may be involved in the analysis process, requiring them to familiarize themselves with the data. This involves actively participating in data collection, typing, and thoroughly reading and re-reading the information. Various analysis methods can be employed based on the collected data and study outcomes. While statisticians typically lead the analysis of quantitative data, research midwives may be heavily involved in data inputting and ensuring accuracy.

Dissemination of Results

One of the most fulfilling aspects of being a research midwife is witnessing the payoff of hard work and being able to share findings. Dissemination can be achieved through writing for publication, delivering presentations to colleagues, and informing study participants. Maintaining professional registration and staying in contact with a supervisor of midwives (SoM) is essential while working as a research midwife. The role of a research midwife

contributes to fulfilling practice requirements for the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2011). Good Clinical Practice (GCP) training is mandatory for all researchers, ensuring ethical research conduct and protection of participant rights (Goodacre et al., 2008). GCP training can be completed through study days or online courses.

Challenges

Becoming a Research Midwife

Transitioning into a career in research may take time as suitable job opportunities are contingent upon research funding and budgets. Many research positions are short-term contracts since projects typically run for a specified duration. However, with the support of current employers, secondments may be available. Securing release from clinical duties for a research secondment can be challenging during staff shortages. Before starting a research position, completion of GCP training, Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, and the acquisition of a research passport or honorary contracts are necessary. The research passport enables researchers to work across multiple National Health Service (NHS) sites under one set of CRB and occupational health checks.

Working as a Research Midwife

Research projects and individual roles within them can vary significantly. Some research midwives are involved in all stages, from design and ethical approval to completion, while others may focus on recruitment or data collection. Time constraints and competing priorities in busy maternity units can impact recruitment and participant engagement. Adjustments may be required during a project, but all changes must be approved by the relevant ethics committee. Skill development in research includes reinforcing the importance of informed consent, effective communication, organizational skills, IT proficiency, poster and presentation preparation, and critical appraisal of research. Midwives interested in further education have options such as pursuing master's programs in research or midwifery. The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) occasionally offers funded places for its research master's program, although availability is limited. Funding may also be obtained through employer trusts or bursary schemes.

Employment

After completing a research project, a research midwife can return to clinical practice with enhanced knowledge and skills as an evidence-based practitioner. Alternatively, they can seek additional experience by working on another project, becoming a project coordinator, conducting their own research, pursuing a career in academia as a lecturer or professor of midwifery, or combining research with clinical work. It's important to note that many research positions are temporary and dependent on external funding, making future opportunities uncertain.

Conclusions

Research is an integral part of a midwife's role, enabling the critique of current evidence-based practice and facilitating involvement or support in research endeavors. The work of a research midwife encompasses various aspects, offering opportunities for skill development and acquisition of new knowledge. These experiences can enrich clinical work and enhance the overall pregnancy experience for women. Developing academic abilities can also open doors for career progression. Engaging in the research process requires hard work but brings immense satisfaction, knowing that one is contributing to shaping the future of midwifery, ensuring its cutting-edge and safe practices for mothers and babies.

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