

Four pillars: The importance of clinical research

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This series explores the four pillars of advanced clinical practice and here, Rebecca Turner explores the pillar of clinical research.

The role of the ophthalmic advanced nurse practitioner, as with all registered practitioners allied to ophthalmology, is on an upward trajectory. The prevalence of age and vision-related diseases such as glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy means the need for high-quality, evidence-based practice in ophthalmology has never been so crucial. This is central to the delivery of care to an increasingly elderly population in numbers that pose a significant challenge to the capacity of the traditional workforce.

Clinical research plays a crucial role in empowering advanced practitioners to deliver safe, effective, and innovative care. It not only informs best practices but also ensures that nurses remain active contributors to the development of eyecare. The multi-professional framework [1] recognises that there are many ways to gain and develop advanced practice capabilities, research being one of them.

It could be argued that traditionally, the research pillar is the most challenging one for the average ophthalmic nurse practitioner. This is due to many reasons, including: a lack of research acumen, time, opportunity and funding. If we can get past the fact that research is more than massive randomised controlled trials and complex statistical analysis, then the achievement of the research pillar is far more achievable.

The following paper sets out the key benefits of ophthalmic nurses engaging with the research pillar of advanced practice.

Bridging the divide between research and practice

In ophthalmology, the pace of innovation in diagnostics, medical treatments and surgical techniques is accelerating, which is why it is important that nurses remain informed of the latest findings. This is especially important for advanced practice nurses, who are often involved in clinical decision-making, patient education and chronic disease management.

By engaging with clinical research, evaluation and audit, ophthalmic nurses can bridge the gap between evidence and everyday practice. They can critically appraise new studies, apply findings to patient care, and even lead or collaborate in research projects. This contributes to improved patient outcomes, reduced healthcare costs and higher standards of care [2].

Clinical decision-making

Advanced ophthalmic nurses frequently manage complex cases, triage patients and provide pre- and postoperative care. In these settings, evidence-based clinical decision-making is essential. For instance, staying informed about the latest research on anti-VEGF therapies for age-related macular degeneration allows nurses to educate patients, monitor treatment responses and flag potential complications early.

Clinical research equips nurses with the tools to interpret emerging data, weigh risks and benefits, and provide care tailored to individual patients. This autonomy and depth of understanding elevate the nursing role from task-oriented support to strategic partner in patient care [3].



Innovation in patient care

Nurses often have unique insights into patient needs, preferences and challenges that may go unnoticed by other members of the healthcare team. When nurses participate in or initiate clinical research, they help generate knowledge that reflects the realities of patient care. For example, studies on patient adherence to eye drop regimens or the psychosocial impact of vision loss can shape interventions that improve both clinical and quality-of-life outcomes [4].

Advanced ophthalmic nurses can contribute to research on assistive technology, teleophthalmology, and community-based screening programmes, especially in underserved populations. Their involvement ensures that innovations are practical, patient-centred, and scalable.

Professional development and leadership

Engagement in clinical research supports ongoing professional development. It allows advanced practice nurses to deepen their knowledge, sharpen analytical skills, and gain recognition as clinical leaders. For those pursuing higher education, such as master's or doctoral degrees, participation in research is often a core component of training.

Moreover, being part of the research community opens up avenues for collaboration with ophthalmologists, optometrists, orthoptists and imagers, fostering interdisciplinary teamwork. These collaborations enrich the nursing role and highlight the value nurses bring to both clinical and academic settings [5].

Shaping future research and healthcare policy

Healthcare policies and clinical guidelines are increasingly driven by research data. Nurses who are informed by clinical research can better critically analyse and advocate for policies that support effective eyecare delivery. Whether it's promoting nurse-led glaucoma clinics, expanding screening services in rural areas or integrating holistic care approaches, evidence is the most powerful tool in influencing change [6].

By engaging with clinical research, advanced ophthalmic nurses play an active and authoritative part in shaping health systems and services that are inclusive, equitable and efficient.

Barriers to research participation

Despite its benefits, several barriers limit the involvement of nurses in clinical research. These include lack of time, limited access to training, insufficient institutional support and perceptions that research is outside the nursing domain. Addressing these challenges requires a cultural shift within healthcare organisations to recognise and support the research potential of nursing staff.

Mentorship programmes, writing retreats, protected time for research activities and accessible training in research methods can empower more ophthalmic nurses to take part in or lead studies. Additionally, integrating research into clinical roles by incorporating it in the job plans (rather than treating it as a separate domain) can help normalise evidence-based practice at every level of nursing.

In summary

The importance of clinical research in advanced ophthalmic nursing cannot be overstated. It enhances care quality, supports professional growth, fosters innovation, promotes interdisciplinary collaboration, and empowers nurses to lead change within their field. As the demands on eyecare services grow and the scope of nursing practice develops, a strong foundation in clinical research will be key to ensuring that ophthalmic nurses continue to provide world-class, patient-centred care. Embracing research is not just about something removed from everyday practice, it is about staying informed and participating in the future development of visual health.

References

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