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## **What has studying research methods got to do with practice? The reflections of student midwives and nurses**

### **Abstract**

At the point of registration, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) requires nurses and midwives to prioritise people; practise effectively; preserve safety and promote professionalism and trust (NMC, 2015). In order to practise effectively, registrants must 'always practise in line with the best available evidence' (NMC, 2015:7) both in terms of their skills and competencies as well as the evidence on which their practise is based.

As University Lecturers teaching on pre-registration nursing and midwifery programmes, a key aspect of our role is to ensure students appreciate the link between research and practice; understand how gold standard care is based on best evidence and realise that by studying research methods during their programme of study they are actually developing higher order skills of critical thinking and decision making – highly transferable skills for safe and effective clinical practice; commensurate with graduate level programmes of study.

Keywords: research methods; pre-registration midwifery education; pre-registration nursing education; evidence-based practice

### **Introduction**

The Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 created the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) whose primary function is to 'establish standards of education, training, conduct and performance for nurses and midwives and to ensure the maintenance of those standards [...] to safeguard the health and well-being' of the public (Department of Health, 2002:4). In relation to pre-registration education, there are specific standards for student midwives (NMC, 2009) and student nurses (NMC, 2010) to ensure competency at the point of registration.

The NMC requires student midwives to achieve competence in four domains: 'effective midwifery practice; professional and ethical practice; developing the individual midwife and others and achieving quality care through evaluation and research' (NMC, 2009:23). In relation to evaluation and research the student is not only expected to keep up to date with evidence, but more importantly should have the skills to critically evaluate research in order to appropriately apply

findings to their practice. There is also an expectation to share best practice and disseminate evidence to others for the benefit of women and their babies.

Similarly nursing students are expected to achieve competence in four domains which inform their field of nursing, these being: 'professional values, communication and interpersonal skills, nursing practice and decision making and leadership, management and team working' (NMC, 2010:7). This is against a backdrop which sees healthcare environments undergoing rapid and ever present change. The NMC (2010) stipulates that its nursing workforce needs to be able to respond to the needs of a complex society with a diverse population; employing technological advances to advance practice development and be part of leading ongoing service redesign. Graduate skills, learned as part of nurse education enables them to 'think analytically, use problem solving approaches and evidence in decision making' (NMC, 2010:5) in their role of safeguarding the public.

### **From apprentice to graduate: the research aware student**

The midwifery profession in England and Wales was unrecognised and unregulated until the introduction of The Midwives Act in 1902 which led to the setting up of the first Central Midwives Board whose responsibilities included regulating, supervising and restricting the practice of midwives. The requirement to comply with rules and regulations to gain certification to practice and be admitted to the roll of midwives gradually raised the status of the profession as new entrants were required to receive hospital training and examination and women and babies were now legally protected from the practices of uneducated and untrained women. With the introduction of the National Health Service in 1945 came free and comprehensive maternity care and in turn free midwifery training.

In the 1980s there was growing concern about the direction of midwifery education and reduced recruitment. Research (Radford and Thompson, 1988, cited in: Macdonald, 2011) led to the piloting of seven direct entry programmes at Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE) level linked to Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). These programmes proved to be very successful and by 2000 three quarters of midwifery registrants were trained through the direct entry route (United Kingdom Central Council (UKCC), 1999). All pre-registration midwifery programmes are now degree level and as a graduate profession newly qualified midwives are expected to have the ability to think critically, evaluate, analyse and reflect on their practice. As the lead professional in providing care and support to women throughout the childbirth continuum and co-ordinator of care in complex cases where a multi-professional approach is required, it is essential that midwives ensure their practice is current. In preparation for this responsibility and to meet the requirements of the revalidation process once qualified (NMC, 2016) it is also essential that student midwives acknowledge the importance of lifelong learning.

Likewise professional nurse education was established as an apprenticeship model in 1860, where student nurses were paid employees, taught in standalone schools of nursing linked to local hospitals; with clinical expertise derived from

senior colleagues (Bradford, 2001). Teaching was largely focused on rote learning, with little or no scientific underpinning, and where a questioning mind was yet to be seen of value. The status quo remained unchanged until an increasing need for nursing to be perceived as a discipline in its own right, to enhance self-awareness and evidence-based practice to inform complex care delivery (Willis, 2012). The solution was to change the nursing workforce and the care delivered via its educational basis, proposing a wide reaching reform, known as Project 2000. It was established in 1986 by the UKCC and also heralded the move of nurse education into Higher Education. As a form of nurse education it ceased to exist following review by the UKCC in 1999, as nurse registrants' fitness to practice at the point of qualification was questioned. The review caused a realignment of curriculum to the needs of service provision, with an increased emphasis on practical skills training, multiple routes of entry and the opportunity for continued professional development of practitioners (UKCC 1999; Lord, 2002). Retrospectively, research indicates that Project 2000 registrants were more evidential in their thinking, with the ability to adapt to and implement change more readily than peers trained under the apprenticeship model, reaffirming the value of moving nursing to higher education despite misgivings (UKCC, 1999; Willis, 2012). More recently we have seen the introduction of a graduate only profession where, since 2013, all pre-registration nursing students have been educated to degree level, making this the foundation for nursing practice (Council for Healthcare Regulation (CHRE)/NMC 2009; NMC, 2010), and perceived as a necessary component to meet the requirements of the contemporary healthcare agenda.

### **Students' reflections on studying research methods**

As lecturers, we know the importance of studying research methods as part of undergraduate nursing and midwifery programmes, not only to meet the academic requirements of both courses but also because we believe the skills students develop during research methods modules are relevant and transferable to practice. With this in mind we asked second and third year nursing and midwifery students the following questions:

- What have been your experiences of learning about research methods so far in your programme of study?
- Do student midwives/nurses need to understand research methods to be good nurses/midwives? Why? Why not?
- Can you think of any transferable skills you might develop by studying research methods?

### **Midwifery Students' Responses**

Research methods were a tough aspect of the course to begin with. I think the majority of the cohort struggled to grasp the importance of research in midwifery. However, the passion of our tutors soon got through to us and we started to see the application of research in every aspect of our practice. Everything you do as an autonomous practitioner is around evidence-based practice and the only way this comes to light is through research. Research is certainly not to be underestimated.

Amy Leggett

For me, research studies were a bit of a foreign topic. The last time I had done anything like that was 8 years ago during A level psychology! It took a while to get my head around all the different terms, but as my lecturer suggested, I stuck definitions of some of them around my flat so I would see them frequently.

I think nurses and midwives need an appreciation of research methods as it enables us to deduce whether a piece of research is of a high enough standard to apply it to our practice. You wouldn't want to base an area of your practice on a study that only had 2 participants who were heavily influenced by the researchers themselves, would you?

In this way, studying research methods has enabled me to appreciate the critiquing skills that I use now, and will continue to do so, to deduce whether research should influence my clinical practice.

Victoria Ivimey-Cook

At the beginning of our research module it felt that the topic was so far away from what I had expected to be learning in my midwifery degree. However, as the module progressed, the importance of being able to distinguish quality research became clear. As midwives we must base our practice on the best available evidence and learn to use the skills we develop as students to critique pieces of research. This ultimately allows us to decide what is credible and can be incorporated into the care we provide alongside guidelines and policies. In this sense I also believe that having these skills helps us to protect and promote a midwife's autonomy.

Ilaria Grzelak

### **Nursing Students' Responses**

I feel that the skills learned through doing the literature review have prepared me for my dissertation as well as going into practice. I feel it has enabled me look and think about the research from a different perspective and how patient care can be improved upon. An example of this could be as small as providing the patient with appropriate additional information to help the individual understand the treatment and care being given. This in itself provides both education and reassurance to the patient regarding their health and wellbeing.

Claire Coughlan

Everyone involved in evidence-based care needs to understand research methods before implementation of research into practice. It is vital for service improvement as care cannot be improved unless a solid argument has been made for a new way of working. Furthermore, being able to understand research methods enables us to undertake research which is vital in the progression of care and treatment development.

Mathias Friedel.

Evidence-based practice has been one of the mostly used phrases from day one throughout my nursing education. Lecturers explain what being 'evidence-based' means and how important it is as a tool in academic work as well as in practice. In year two you become the critical thinker the first year was preparing you to be and to analyse the information that you are given and you are finding; whilst developing your confidence and using the knowledge to make clinical judgements. Nursing is a never-ending learning curve - nursing education gives you the skills to know what to do in situations where you are unsure of what do, and also the ability to keep up with new evidence and approaches that aim for better quality of care and health outcomes throughout your career.  
Savvina Kazani

## **Conclusion**

Service users expect and deserve high quality care delivered by well-trained healthcare professionals. By being educated to degree level, nurses and midwives have been trained not to practice by rote or tradition; rather their pre-registration education has equipped them to question the practice of self and others in order to ensure it is always based on best evidence. How do they know it's the best evidence? The inclusion of research methods modules in both undergraduate programmes provides student midwives and nurses with transferable skills, giving them the tools and confidence to be critical; to analyse; to evaluate; to question; to be autonomous practitioners. As a result, service users can be reassured that they are receiving high quality care based on the best available evidence. What is reassuring for us as lecturers is that the responses from our student midwives and nurses validate the inclusion of research methods modules as part of their programmes of study. For some, the link between theory and practice was not immediately obvious; however in time students from both disciplines realised that the skills acquired whilst studying research methods inform and enhance their clinical practice and as a consequence have a positive impact on the experiences of service users.

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