Getting Started In Clinical Research

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Research career opportunities and settings are varied and diverse. Areas include public health or epidemiological research, dental hygiene profession-based research, practice-based research, university research programs and corporate research, including basic clinical and product evaluation.

Interestingly, when asked about careers in research, some hygienists associate these opportunities with “lab jobs” or “desk jobs,” leaving patient contact and clinical experiences behind. Basic science is a very necessary component of clinical research, but for those wanting to utilize their basic science training combined with clinical skills gained during practice, a career in clinical research may be of interest.

Career paths in any discipline have basic building blocks or steps that enhance the journey. For clinical research, the steps include clinical experience, advanced education, networking and mentoring. In fact, career paths in clinical research for the dental hygienist include the obvious – therapist or examiner – maximizing the clinical experience provided through dental hygiene training and patient care. More advanced roles include sponsor and/or principal investigator, coordinator/manager of the research project or, in the regulatory audit or quality assurance function, usually achieved after further education in the field of clinical research. Formalized educational programs have been created to train individuals from many professions for these roles in clinical research.

There are many educational programs offered for advancement in clinical research. A Google search using “clinical research training” yielded 18,400,000 results. Programs are varied and are offered at the university level (eg: full degree or certificate-granting), through private educational services companies and associations dedicated to clinical research professionals. For example, in the U.S., Drexel University offers an online master’s degree in Clinical Research Organization and Management and a Master of Science in Clinical Research for Health Professionals, in addition to online certificate programs. Other universities and colleges offer similar options. A check of local area institutions is the first search to conduct when investigating further education. One example of an international educational program can be found at The University of Kent, U.K. Private educational services, such as Barnett Educational Services, offer online training and certificate programs in clinical research.

Two professional organizations dedicated to the support of clinical research professionals are the Society of Clinical Research Associates and the Association of Clinical Research Professionals. These organizations offer training and certification for Clinical Research Associates and Clinical Research Coordinators. Additionally, these sites offer current lists of available clinical research positions.

Mentoring and networking play important roles in getting started in clinical research. Students can begin by seeking guidance from professors involved in research. Practicing professionals can access information through national dental hygiene websites that contain lists of available mentors. Dental and dental hygiene schools are another source for networking. Schools are involved in conducting clinical trials and may be advertising for clinicians to participate as therapists and research subjects. Another important resource to consider is professional publications. Authors can be contacted to provide guidance as well as offer discussion in their area of research.

Important personal attributes that may help in a successful career in clinical research include strong written and oral communication skills, adaptability, being a self-starter, attention to detail and good time management skills. Success of a study highly depends upon a variety of people being able to effectively work together, so being a good team player is crucial.

This workshop will provide interactive discussions and presentations by clinical research from academia and private industry. The goals of the workshop are to:

- Provide the participant with a good understanding of the roles and responsibilities involved in a career in clinical research
- Explore the process involved in day to day conduct of clinical trials from the perspective of the sponsor and investigator
- Compare and contrast industry and academic research career pathways
- Learn about Dental Practice-Based Research Networks designed to train clinician investigators to study problems encountered on a daily basis in practice

Using role play and open discussions, the clinical trial process will be explored from hypothesis inception through publication of results. The workshop
format is designed such that attendees will gain an understanding of the skills, roles and responsibilities involved in all aspects of clinical research. The workshop will be given by 3 experienced research dental hygienists, each providing her unique perspective on her own career path, discussing the clinical research process from each of their experiences and providing insights from the academic, corporate and contract research organization perspectives.

MaryAnn Cugini brings her career experiences in academic and industry research settings to the workshop. She will share her regulatory experience and provide a basic understanding of the importance of maintaining protocol adherence and abiding to the regulatory standards of clinical research.

Having managed clinical trials for several corporate organizations and with independent clinical research organizations as well as academic institutions, Chris Charles will provide her insights regarding selecting and validating research sites and investigators, protocol development and the rigor surrounding conduct of clinical trials, and communication/publication of results.

Janet Kinney will speak about the importance of having clinical experience and good patient management skills prior to commencing a career in clinical research. In addition, she will share how educational training in the area of research methods helps to answer the “why” questions during the inception, development and conduct of studies. And finally, as a fairly new investigator, Janet will share with the audience her thoughts about the importance of networking and having strong mentors to help guide the newcomer during the early career years.

In summary, getting started in clinical research takes some concerted effort and forethought on your part. Prepare yourself by seeking educational opportunities that train you in the field, and then be proactive about building diverse networks and relationships with experienced people who are in a position to help you achieve your career goals. Once engaged in clinical research, exercise exemplary levels of confidentiality and protection of intellectual property and always be cognizant of your obligation to comply with Good Clinical Practice procedures and behaviors.

Whether you are a just starting a career in clinical research or are a well-seasoned professional, the field of clinical research offers challenging and exciting opportunities allowing for continual growth both personally and professionally.