

Developing an interest in pharmacy practice research — where to now?

In this article, **Linda Sheldrake**, research strategy co-ordinator, and **Beth Allen**, research programme co-ordinator, at the Pharmacy Practice Research Trust, explain how the trust's awards and bursaries offer one route to overcoming barriers in accessing academia and practice research

Decisions on career pathways made at the point of qualification, as many of us know, are not always set in stone. Interests and priorities can change over time. For many health care professionals, including pharmacists, the opportunity to take time out due to work or personal commitments rarely comes along. Furthermore a desire to pursue alternative career pathways or personal career goals demands drive and commitment and is often difficult to maintain and, indeed, to fund.

Career pathways often assume a career intention at the onset of education or completion of undergraduate education.¹ They are more commonly associated with the decisions that students make either before, during or immediately after qualification on which sector of pharmacy to choose. This is particularly true of academia where decisions to undertake a PhD are often made before graduation or on completion of preregistration training. However, experience in the field can sometimes lead to a specific interest or desire to pursue a change in career.

With this in mind, there is an increasing call for career pathways, not just in pharmacy but in the world of health care and, indeed, work generally, to be flexible enough to enable practitioners to move across or between sectors of choice and progress in disciplines entered later in life. This is facilitated by providing opportunities (gates) or entry points to training programmes and additional qualifications that are not time-bound or constrained by inflexible funding models. This has been recognised in medicine with the recommendation to “uncouple” specialist training from early career intention to allow change of career later in life.²

The exposure to the influence of research on practice, or development of an interest in a specific disease group, or groups of patients, all exert external influences on pharmacists during the course of their working lives. For those who wish to change direction in their career, or add new dimensions to an existing career, the ability to do so can only benefit the profession, bringing knowledge from one sector to bear on another. For some, realising the potential of using evidenced-based research in practice, increasing knowledge towards specialist and advanced practice status and gaining academic qualifications to move into research and teaching could be a real option, but one that is pursued far too infrequently in pharmacy.

The UK Clinical Research Collaboration (UKCRC) has published recommendations

for training the researchers and educators of the future for qualified staff in medicine and dentistry and more recently for graduate nurses.³ These make clear that proposed dedicated academic training programmes should not exclude alternative means of entering and pursuing a career in academia and there is now a recognised need to establish clear pathways into academia for new and expert practitioners.³ Although similar work with pharmacists and other health care practitioners is not planned by the UKCRC, some of the recommendations could be considered to be relevant to pharmacists.

The UKCRC report details some of the identified barriers to entry into academic careers including, among others:

- Lack of a clear route of entry and a transparent career structure
- Inflexible training pathways
- Failure to gain independent research impetus or renew grants, or both

Anecdotally, all the indications are that these barriers may explain in part why schools of pharmacy find it difficult to identify the next generation of pharmacists to join the academic workforce.

To overcome these barriers flexible access gates need to be created. One such identified gate that would support change, advance

practice or support development of academic careers is access to grants and awards to support both training and salary. Access to this funding at national level is highly competitive, with training schemes open to all health care professions being particularly so, especially for professions like pharmacy where research is not yet an embedded aspect of practice. Getting a foot on the first rung of the research ladder is never easy and although some pharmacists have made successful transitions this is exceptional.

Pharmacy Practice Research Trust

The Pharmacy Practice Research Trust is an independent charity which aims, as one of its objectives, to increase research capacity and build a research evidence base for pharmacy. The trust provides two sources of funding which are intended to support practitioners develop expertise in research and newly qualified researchers to establish research careers:

Practice research awards There are two practice research awards, the Galen Award and the Sir Hugh Linstead Fellowship.

Galen award The Galen award comprises one or more awards made annually to a total value of £10,000 funded by a bequest by Rowland Henry Williams.

Sir Hugh Linstead Fellowship The Sir Hugh Linstead Fellowship comprises one or more awards made annually to a total value of £45,000 funded by a grant from the Leverhulme Trade Charities Trust in order to support research relating to community pharmacy.

All applicants for these awards must be registered members of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain. (Those currently undertaking preregistration training will be considered but will need to have joined the register before receiving funding.)

Research Training Bursary Scheme

The Research Training Bursary Scheme is intended to support community pharmacists who have an interest in developing their skills in conducting research relating to everyday practice. Funding of up to £40,000 is available to fund a number of projects over the following levels of funding:

Level 1 — funding to undertake research modules and a small-scale project (supported

The Pharmacy Practice Research Trust

The Pharmacy Practice Research Trust was set up by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society in 1999. It is an independent research charity, with a broad remit to promote and develop research relating to the practice of pharmacy. The trust:

- Funds research relating to the place of medicines in society and the practice of pharmacy
- Stimulates debate and spreads knowledge about medicines and the people who use and take them
- Will develop a new generation of academic leaders who can lead the debate and inform thinking, particularly within pharmacy

More information is available from the Society's website www.rpsgb.org/worldofpharmacy/research/pharmacypracticeresearchtrust/.

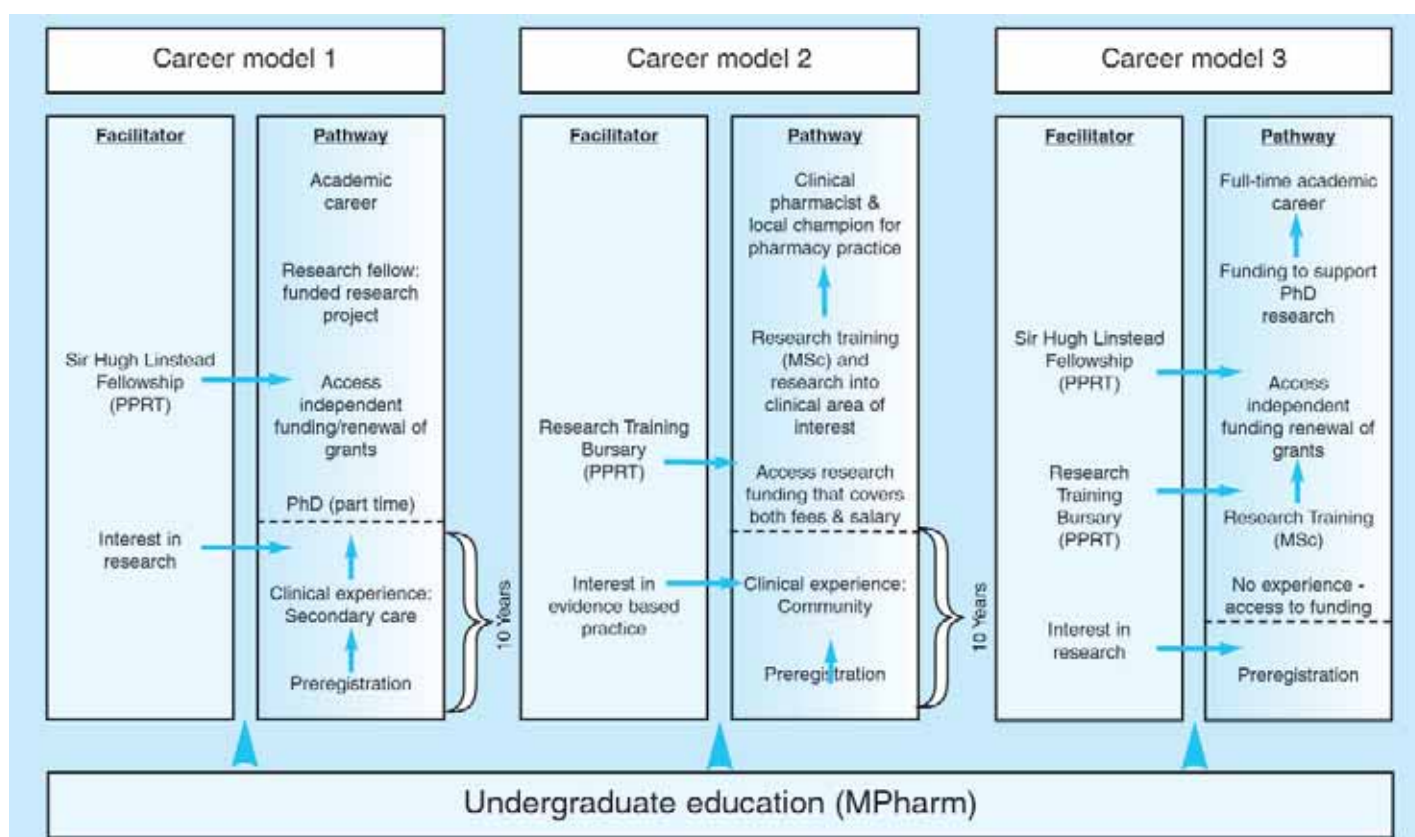


Figure 1. Career Pathway Models Utilising Pharmacy Practice Research Trust Funding

by a research organisation, for example, a higher education institute, primary care research network or research and development support unit).

Level 2 — funding to upgrade a diploma in clinical/community pharmacy to a master of science degree, which usually involves undertaking a further two modules (one on research methods) and undertaking a project.

Level 3 — funding to undertake a non-pharmacy MSc.

The impact that these awards and bursaries have had on recipients has been examined through independent research commissioned by the trust.⁴ This identified that funding had been most useful in providing: back fill salary and locum cover; fees for higher degrees; specific research training; consumables and other expenses; and the capability to expand the size and geographical area of a current study.

Most of the recipients have gone on to disseminate their findings at conferences or in peer-reviewed journals. Other additional benefits identified were: improvement in clinical knowledge; exposure to different methodologies, such as those of social science; increased or renewed enthusiasm for research; and establishing successful and continuing research collaborations.

The trust has followed the career pathways of award and bursary recipients and identified some clear models of career pathways following the funding from the trust. Figure 1 presents three such pathways where grants from the trust have acted as a catalyst or facilitator

within these specific career pathways. Career model 1 links closely with the desire to enter academia later in a pharmacy career and developing an interest in evidence-based clinical practice. Model 2 demonstrates the role that the grants play in building research capacity in practice as well as academia. One of the recipients of a level 2 research training bursary who has followed model 2 states: "The bursary, although unlikely to cover all costs, would help me find the time to stand back from the busyness of business to look at the problems facing us in developing the research base and hopefully stimulate myself and my colleagues to get involved in research in and outside of our own practice."

Model 3 demonstrates an early pathway for a future academic career with an interest in research from undergraduate level. The Figure shows where, in all three pathways, barriers lie in accordance with those identified by the

UKCRC and where the use of the grants can help to overcome these barriers.

Conclusion

With its diverse sectors, changing clinical role and increased integration into patient care pathways, pharmacy offers many career choices. However, these choices should not be set in stone and the profession as a whole needs to allow flexibility in training and academic pathways to allow for career development and change. There is also a need to increase the role of evidence-based practice in care delivery. The awards and bursaries available through the Pharmacy Practice Research Trust offer one route to overcoming barriers in accessing academia and practice research.

References

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4. John D. How do the Pharmacy Practice Research Trust grants support the development of research capacity? Report from Robert Gordon University, Cardiff University, John Moores University. London: PPRT; 2007.

More information about the trust and its awards

The next round of awards can be applied for from January 2008 with a closing date in May. The successful applicants will be announced around July/August.

Further information and advice is available from Beth Allen or Linda Sheldrake (tel 020 7572 2466). Details on guidelines and applications is available from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's website (www.rpsgb.org/societyfunctions/awards-scholarships/practiceresearchawards.html).