



Making research everybody's business—Innovation to introduce Foundation doctors to research

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ABSTRACT

In order to train a future workforce able to meet the needs of its patients it is vital to ensure that opportunities to engage in research are inbuilt to training programmes. This strategy meets national recommendations recently published by NIHR, RCP and GMC. A nationally funded expansion of 'standard' Foundation programmes offers a unique opportunity to develop innovative new posts which include exposure to clinical research. In NHSE Midlands a pilot Foundation Year two (F2) post in Diabetes Research was implemented in August 2022, embedded into a standard Foundation programme. Subjective evaluation of the post, by F2 doctors and trainers, has been very positive and a further two posts in Research and Innovation commence August 2023 and 2024. These unique and geographically co-located programmes also aim to support the widening participation in medicine agenda. This model could be adapted within any Foundation School.

Introduction

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) and National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) published a joint position statement setting out a series of recommendations for making research part of everyday practice for all clinicians.¹ Within this statement it recommended a requirement to promote opportunities for postgraduate doctors to engage with research, enabling them to build experience that they can then draw on throughout their career.

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly illustrated the importance of clinical research. Research also has a role to play by improving the efficiency and efficacy of care in the NHS and in improving patient outcomes. The GMC position statement 'Normalising research – promoting research for all doctors' states clearly that 'research saves lives, enhances the quality of life and improves patient care' and sets out a clear structure describing how doctors and medical students can be supported to engage in research alongside clinical practice.²

The number of graduating medical students will increase significantly from 2023, due to a planned expansion of medical student places. In 2017/18 there were 8,000 medical students, rising to 10,500 in

2021/22.³ Health Education England committed to fund a national expansion of Foundation training posts, to ensure that these larger cohorts of students have high-quality training posts available to them.

With the recently published recommendation for making research part of everyday practice for all clinicians, NHSE Midlands and the Leicester Diabetes Centre (LDC) developed a collaboration to explore opportunities to fund new Foundation Year 2 (F2) posts in Research and Innovation. The aim, to pilot and then embed these posts into 'standard' Foundation programmes widening access to research experience to early career postgraduate doctors in order to meet the recommendations of the RCP/NIHR report and to offer opportunity to experience first-hand how research and clinical medicine link to form the basis of high-quality clinical practice.

Solution/methodology

In an innovative collaboration aimed at providing high quality research opportunities for Foundation Doctors, NHSE Midlands Foundation programme, LDC and University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust

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Table 1
Key themes taken from qualitative feedback – diabetes research F2 post.

Description of post – practicalities, case-mix and clinical skills gained
<p>The post is a varied and multi-faceted role. There are many opportunities to gain a greater insight into research and the methods of carrying it out whilst also regularly attending specialised diabetes clinics. There's a great emphasis put on continued learning with numerous teaching sessions to attend.</p> <p>Research specific skills and experience</p> <p>The research-based activities include; attending trial training where you learn about novel devices and investigational medicines, screening and consenting patients and carrying out follow-up visits. The post allowed me to appreciate how protocols are written, as well as see patients on a regular basis for different studies. This was a very enjoyable post because many F2's have little to no experience in research, so it allowed me to understand some of the day to day functions of the clinical side of research. This post has expanded my horizons in regards how research is conducted and how protocols are written.</p> <p>Transferable skills gained</p> <p>There are opportunities to apply new knowledge and refine communication skills. It is a self-led role to a certain extent, so there are chances to be involved in audits and you are able to take time out to develop transferable skills such as leadership, public speaking, and teaching. To make the most of this role, it is important to try, take initiative and seek out opportunities – this post truly is what you make of it! It emphasised the importance of research in medicine and I was able to observe the varied scope of doctors that can be involved, from GPs to professors to junior doctors.</p> <p>Key learning, wider opportunities and future perspectives</p> <p>I found this (post) invaluable to my training, as research continues to be a fundamental factor to the building blocks of clinical medicine. Prior to this role, I had not been involved in research, but I now feel much more confident in my understanding and application of research as well as having the chance to improve my skill set, which I am keen to implement in clinical medicine. The opportunities that this role presents and the knowledge that is gained is invaluable and, in my opinion, unparalleled in any other post that is currently available for trainee doctors. This is due to the unique angle that this role takes, combining both clinical medicine and research. I highly recommend this role as I feel that it has allowed me to build a strong foundation for my future career as a clinician. I think going forward I will be better positioned to undertake my own research in a field/topic that I find more interesting. I would recommend everyone to apply to a research post, even if you have not been previously involved in any research.</p>

(UHL) developed and jointly funded a substantive F2 programme including a Diabetes Research Foundation F2 post, to commence August 2022. The post is based in the Patient Recruitment Centre (PRC) at LDC. The LDC was chosen as the site for this post due to pre-existing collaborative links and experience and enthusiasm, within the LDC team, to train early career doctors.

The PRC sits within NIHR infrastructure, hosted by the Clinical Research Network, with a focus on phase three clinical trials. Foundation year two doctors in the programme rotate to the LDC on a 4 monthly basis and named clinical supervision is provided by one of the three clinical leads within the LDC. However the LDC has a large multidisciplinary team, including specialised research nurses, dietitians, physiotherapists, psychologist and clinicians who also provide day to day supervision and support in terms of individual learning and development.

The post offers the opportunity to be involved with academic and commercial studies developing a range of clinical and research skills (key elements of the Job Description provided in supplementary material).

The F2 post in Diabetes Research (LDC) was recruited to in August 2022. There are two further F2 posts planned for August 2023 and August 2024 within the Biomedical Research Centre (BRC). In the year August 2022 – July 2023 two F2 doctors undertook the LDC post (one post remained vacant within the programme).

Outcome

We obtained qualitative feedback via email from the first two doctors to undertake the Diabetes Research F2 post (pre-determined questions sent to each doctor and detailed in supplementary material). We were keen to evaluate this programme early on to ensure the post offered a good quality trainee experience, hence feedback was gained from the two doctors who undertook the post in the period August 2022 – July 2023. Reflections from the two doctors are presented in the Table 1 below, according to key themes. Both doctors successfully completed F2 training with all Foundation Programme Competencies completed.

Conclusion and next steps

The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan states that the required increase in medical school places is estimated to be 60–100%, providing 12,000–15,000 places by 2030/31 and that there is an assumption

of proportional rise in Foundation training.⁴ There is also a need to support Widening Participation (WP) in Medicine as creating a diverse and inclusive workforce will create a workforce better equipped to address the needs of its patients.⁵ It is vital that we support both of these priorities (workforce expansion and WP) by providing high quality innovative and accessible training programmes. New programmes should equip doctors with the necessary range of skills and knowledge required to be the healthcare leaders of the future and this substantive post has secured invaluable future clinical research opportunities for foundation doctors.

This post meets the recommendations of the RCP/NIHR report by developing opportunities for postgraduate doctors to engage in research, evidenced by successful recruitment to the posts and feedback from the F2 doctors. By implementing this post in parallel with the planned NHSE expansion of Foundation posts we have ensured that the post will be recurrently funded allowing recruitment into the post year on year. Along with the further planned posts in the BRC we will be able to offer 12 research enriched posts within standard Foundation programmes from August 2025 onwards. As trainee numbers within these 'research enhanced' programmes increases we will be able to gain robust qualitative outcome data allowing from the doctors in training. This model can be developed within any Trust/Foundation School under any further nationally funded expansion of Foundation posts and where collaboration with clinical research teams is strong or can be nurtured. Given the planned workforce expansion set out in the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan it is highly likely further NHSE funded expansion of Foundation posts will occur, opening up the chance for teams to develop equivalent programme models.

Exposure to established and emerging approaches to clinical research and the opportunity to develop a wide variety of transferable skills are features of this innovative post and make this opportunity unique amongst standard foundation programmes. The experience and skills gained may be drawn on in future careers and develop a workforce equipped to manage the challenges of working across systems and providing care for complex population health demands. The transferable skills gained will be invaluable whether the doctors progress into a clinical career pathway or seek an academic career in the future.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.fhj.2024.100020](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fhj.2024.100020).

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