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DISCUSSION



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Research ecosystems: Harnessing the future for clinician-researchers in the acute care setting

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ABSTRACT

Engaging with research evidence is a core pillar of speech-language pathology practice. The importance of active engagement in research is stated as a fundamental requirement by key national and international professional organizations. Research engagement is multifaceted and can involve elements across a continuum that ranges from locating and interpreting relevant research for practice, to developing and leading programs of research. Over the past 15 years there has been an increased focus on the roles, career pathways and impacts of clinician-researchers. This opinion piece aims to describe current evidence around speech-language pathologist (SLP) clinician-researchers within the acute care setting.

KEYWORDS Clinical academic; career; clinician researcher; research; speech-language pathology

What is a clinician-researcher?

This question has been posed by multiple researchers across health, yet a standardised definition remains elusive. In a scoping review on clinician-researcher careers in allied health, Brandenburg et al. (2022) reported 13

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different terms that were used in the literature to describe this role. Across all the definitions, elements of both clinical care and research were key, but there was wide variation in how these roles were fulfilled, the balance between them, and how integrated they were. Whilst clinicians and managers share a similar perception of what these roles entail, there is diversity in how they are implemented (Newington et al., 2022). For example, a typical scenario is an SLP employed within a hospital facility with the majority of their role involving direct clinical care, but they are also involved in conducting/delivering research. Another common scenario is a university-based SLP with a significant research workload allocation but who is also involved in activities directly relating to clinical care. However, there are a diversity of other scenarios, in which clinician-researchers ‘cobble together’ and develop portfolio careers from multiple part-time positions with varying degrees of interrelatedness (Brandenburg & Ward, 2022a). All are considered clinician-researchers despite the variation in their roles. However their role is defined, clinician-researchers are of significant benefit to acute care setting because of their key character traits – being inquisitive, instinctive for new opportunities, able to take risks, team players, tenacious and dedicated (King et al., 2023).

What are the benefits of clinician-researchers?

Clinician-researchers can actively contribute to a research ecosystem. Health settings, including hospitals, that have a rich research culture positively influence patient outcomes, support patient safety, and can lead to better staff retention and satisfaction (Harding et al., 2017). Indeed, in times of ever-increasing costs of delivery of health care, there is an expectation of value for money, including rapid implementation of effective treatments that optimise patient outcomes, and discontinuation of suboptimal care. Clinician-researchers are well placed to enable and lead these processes in acute care settings due to their capacity to integrate the clinical and research elements needed to address these problems (Newington et al., 2021, 2023). They can easily identify the key health service issues affecting their practice, as well as understand how research and research findings can be practically implemented in their setting. Clinician-researchers can also have more wide-spread impacts, including advancing clinician training and skills, enhancing workplace culture, and improving the profile of allied health (Wenke et al., 2017).

What is the path to becoming a clinician-researcher?

There is no single, clearly defined path for aspiring clinician-researchers to attain the required experience across clinical and research spheres. This

may not be surprising when we consider the variation in roles that are considered under the definition of clinician-researcher, and the diversity in organisations that may employ or fund clinician-researcher positions. Brandenburg and Ward (2022a) summarised the most common pathways derived from a sample of 57 allied health clinical researchers, acknowledging most pathways were 'ad hoc' and few structured opportunities existed. Many clinician-researchers reported early interaction between their clinical training and research training, through engaging in a dedicated research project (e.g. honours) during their speech-language pathology degree. This aligns with the fact that research-related competencies make up a significant portion of speech-language pathology graduate competency frameworks (Morgan & Hughes, 2016). As they advanced their clinical skills and moved from junior through to more senior clinical roles, some engaged in elements of active research (e.g. participation in research, quality improvement or evidence-based practice groups). The time involved in research activities incrementally increased in line with an increase in seniority of clinical role.

Across a national context, higher degree training is not absolute for all clinician-researchers but is becoming more common (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2021). Enrolment in a higher research degree can offer structured training and education within a research program with added mentorship and supervision to support the journey. It is important to note that research training can also be actively supported across other contexts, including facility-based research training courses, involvement in team research, and active engagement in processes of evidence-based practice, for example journal clubs or literature reviews. Beyond the development of the individual clinician-researcher, cultivation of a research ecosystem or an environment that supports all aspects relating to the interpretation, creation, implementation, and sustainability of clinical research is critical (Hirschtritt et al., 2018). This active research engagement reflects the fundamental requirement of key national and international professional organizations (Speech Pathology Australia, 2020; The Health and Care Professions Council, 2023).

What are the priorities in advancing clinical researchers in speech-language pathology?

The increasing interest and engagement of SLPs in clinical research provides an unprecedented opportunity to identify the key priorities in advancing this professional route. Specific motivations to engage in research for the SLP workforce reported by Finch et al. (2015) include training/support, confidence, and both personal and organisational priorities. Access to

funding opportunities which enable SLPs protected time to complete further research training and qualifications, including higher level degrees, are vital for those wishing to progress as clinical researchers. These funding streams do not need to be specific to SLPs but need to be well publicised and accessible. Professional bodies and employers need to advocate for the integration of research objectives into any SLP role regardless of career stage to allow people to develop research skills as part of their usual job. These actions align with the development of advanced, enhanced and consultant practice frameworks that exist for speech-language pathology practice (Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists, 2023). Another key priority is developing networks of clinical researchers in SLP to allow for peer support and mentorship as well as problem solving the complexity of the differing roles.

Conclusion

Universities and healthcare providers across public and private contexts must harness the opportunity to strengthen and develop collaborations, including the development of dual clinician/research roles (Brandenburg & Ward, 2022b). Such positions will enable SLPs to be research and clinically active without detriment to one aspect of their career. This will have far-reaching benefits across employment sectors as universities will have access to clinicians who can guide the research directions for health, and the healthcare providers will have access to researchers who can advocate for new services and evidence-based treatment options for their patients. It is time to progress the clinical research ecosystem in speech-language pathology acute care services to create an integrated and sustainable clinical-research environment.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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