

December 2023



Commentary

A Professional Development Initiative for Clinical Research Professionals

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Commentary Overview

- Cancer centers can overcome some clinical research challenges by hiring, training, and retaining clinical research professionals (CRPs) who expertly engage in the design, conduct, and reporting of clinical trials.
- #ResearchOnResearch, an initiative developed at the Abramson Cancer Center Clinical Research Unit of the University of Pennsylvania, engages CRPs in the research enterprise by encouraging them to develop proposals for projects aimed at improving the process of conducting clinical research.
- Since April 2022, 17 #ResearchonResearch abstracts based on CRP-driven quality/performance improvement and research projects have been accepted at national and international research conferences.
- Future goals for #ResearchOnResearch include adopting project workflows as best practices, creating original research, and continuing research projects and quality/performance improvements to collect additional data for generating scholarly publications.

The clinical research enterprise faces many challenges, including regulatory complexity, the intricacies of administering investigational drugs, and the vagaries of research funding. Cancer centers can overcome some of these challenges by hiring, training, and retaining a staff of clinical research professionals (CRPs) who expertly engage in the design, conduct, and reporting of clinical trials. However, maintaining a dedicated core of CRPs is challenging due to the threats of burnout and attrition.

In the Clinical Research Unit of the Abramson Cancer Center of the University of Pennsylvania (ACC CRU), we have approached this challenge by implementing a professional development initiative titled #ResearchOnResearch to encourage CRPs to develop their careers and to recognize their accomplishments.

#ResearchOnResearch grew out of our attempts to maintain staff morale and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACC CRU pivoted to address additional challenges to clinical research management related to the public health mandate to reduce on-site research staff. The ACC CRU universally implemented the use of digital signatures and electronic documents, adopted and expanded remote activities for study participants and for study monitoring/auditing visits, and negotiated with study sponsors to eliminate unnecessary visits and procedures/assessments which did not contribute to patient safety or to efficacy evaluations (Vogl, Sallee, Hendricks, Tabery, Blair, Dahlmeier, Meagher, Cohen, & Vonderheide, 2021).

Yet the reality of reduced on-site CRP staff made existing rote research management tasks even more onerous (e.g., data entry, managing monitoring/auditing visits, answering queries, overseeing investigational drug administration, and screening/enrolling prospective participants). The increased work burden led to frequent CRP burnout and high staff turnover. Creation of a hybrid work model ameliorated some of these negative effects. However, concomitant with the hybrid work model was a recognition that novel approaches were needed to engage and to stimulate CRPs ensconced in the hybrid workspace with intermittent on-site contact with other research staff (Knapke, Jenkerson, Tsao, Freel, Fritter, et al. 2022; Knapke, Snyder, Carter, Fitz-Gerald, Fritter, et al. 2022). Acknowledging that organizations that enable employees to pursue their interests as a part of their work keeps employees engaged in, and appreciative of, their workplaces (Chandra & De Choudury, 2023), ACC CRU administrative leadership created a format for formal recognition of our CRPs efforts toward quality improvement/performance improvement that we named #ResearchOnResearch.

Engaging Clinical Research Professionals in the Research Enterprise

#ResearchOnResearch is an ongoing initiative intended to engage CRPs in the research enterprise by encouraging them to develop proposals for and present the results of projects aimed at improving the process of conducting clinical research. The initiative allows CRPs to pursue their research and academic passions under the aegis of the clinical research enterprise. CRPs leverage their clinical research expertise and interests to develop proposals, abstracts, poster presentations, podium presentations, and ultimately, publications, derived from the cancer clinical research that they support. The #ResearchOnResearch program provides learning modules on the research process and one-on-one, intensive mentoring to encourage CRPs to pursue their research interests, share best practices, and develop research projects and quality/performance improvement projects derived from their clinical research experiences and diverse academic interests.

The learning modules have included basic training in research methods, such as:

- What is Research
- Quantitative Methods
- The Five Phases of Quantitative Research
- The Designing and Planning of Quantitative Research
- The Empirical Phase of Quantitative Research
- The Analytic Phase of Quantitative Research

Our individualized mentoring has focused on creating abstracts and posters. Our goal has been for our CRPs to develop and to showcase their quality/performance improvement projects and research projects at national and international oncology research conferences. The initial results of #ResearchOnResearch have been gratifying. Since April 2022, 17 abstracts based upon ongoing, CRP-driven quality/performance improvement projects and research projects have been accepted at national and international research conferences.

Future Goals and Metrics of Success

As we look to the future, #ResearchOnResearch's focus and metrics of success necessarily must extend beyond poster presentations. Future goals include the adoption of project workflows as best practices, the creation of original research, and the continuation of its research projects

and quality/performance improvements to collect additional data to generate scholarly publications.

Our projects are moving toward these goals. A clinical research nurse's presentation at the 2022 14th Annual Conference of the International Association of Clinical Research Nurses outlined an EPIC-derived workflow for tracking physician investigator attestations of clinical research staff documentation, which has been adopted as best practice for physician attestation of clinical research nurse progress notes in the ACC CRU. The ability of this initiative to promote original research is reflected in the poster presentation by one of our clinical research coordinators on age as a predictor of hospitalization after CAR T therapy. Given this trajectory, the continued success of this initiative and the enthusiastic response of the ACC CRU CRPs, #ResearchOnResearch will continue as a vehicle to acknowledge and to celebrate the contributions of CRPs in the clinical research enterprise. Moreover, given the engagement and enthusiastic response of the ACC CRU CRPs, this professional development model would succeed at other cancer centers to improve staff engagement, morale, and retention.

References

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