



Editorial

Editorial: Clinical Education Research and Dental Public Health

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The central premise of Dental Public Health (DPH) is striving to *change* the oral health of the nation for the better and as Leo Buscaglia, the 19th century historian, elegantly stated; ‘Change is the end result of all true learning’.

The two primary goals of DPH; promoting oral health and preventing oral disease, have at their very heart the education of the general public and patients. Similarly, in seeking to recruit, train and retain an effective dental workforce, with a focus on oral health-related quality of life improvements, close attention to the education of those practitioners is imperative.

It is necessary therefore, when designing and delivering any impactful DPH initiative, whether it be directed at patients, public or practitioners, that due consideration is given to its educational facets in order to ensure maximum benefit. The role of education and training in such developments should not be an afterthought and must be informed by a robust evidence-base developed through rigorously designed and conducted educational research.

Clinical Education Research (ClinEdR) encompasses a breadth of research activity in dental and other clinical professions education. As well as developing and evaluating educational interventions, it considers learner and practitioner experience and is grounded in theories that shape our understanding of education and work in health and social care. In this way, ClinEdR impacts by enhancing the education, training and development of health and social care practitioners, and the organisations within which they work and learn. In encompassing areas of enquiry such as retention, recruitment and the establishment of a more stable, inclusive and diverse workforce, education research has potential to impact the very cornerstone of dental public health.

However, the community of educational researchers that might provide such an evidence-base is lacking, both in number and recognition at every career stage.

Educational research, its lexicon, underpinning philosophies and methodologies are not commonly taught within dental undergraduate programmes, where research, tends to be presented in the context of biomedical research informing clinical practice. Here, there is an emphasis on positivist paradigms with research focused on establishing ‘truths’, thereby limiting research by failing to

recognise the realities of clinical practice. There is seldom any teaching on the educational process itself, nor the research that underpins it.

Many dentists and dental care professionals develop an interest in educational research from their own experiences of learning and practice, and as teachers themselves. For instance, students may become interested in educational processes as they progress through their course, perhaps through experiences of peer teaching and assessment and may come to see themselves as future educators. This often leads budding researchers to question the processes of education; what works, for whom, and why?

However, keen and capable practitioners may subsequently lack opportunities to incorporate education research into their careers. Poor awareness of limited opportunities is compounded by a lack of role models and mentors to provide the support and direction that early career researchers need.

The route from clinician to researcher varies across the different healthcare professions and in different parts of the UK devolved nations. In England, they include pathways supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) such as academic and in-practice fellowships. NIHR welcomes applications encompassing the full range of clinical education research topics affecting the dental workforce.

The Incubator for Clinical Education Research is an NIHR initiative to develop ClinEdR as an academic field. It aims to provide ClinEd researchers with a network offering support, advice and opportunities to help develop their careers. It seeks to improve the visibility of ClinEdR as a career destination for academic researchers from all clinical professions and address systemic barriers that affect entry and progression in the field.

Since its establishment in 2020, the Incubator has identified the variability in experience of different professional groups working in this research space. A review of NIHR awards identified that ClinEdR, and particularly Dental Education Research, is under represented, despite its cross-cutting importance.

This position has informed subsequent work examining the barriers and facilitators for early career researchers. The lack of perceived ‘status’ of ClinEdR is cited by

many as being a major barrier, linked to its inherently smaller grant income and a perceived lack of weighting in comparison to biomedical research with respect to promotion. There is also under appreciation of the scope of ClinEdR, its impact and its methods. A greater understanding of, and respect for, the role of qualitative and other social science research methods used in dental education research is needed. Similarly, an appreciation that educational practice and research are distinct entities, which whilst often incorporated in academic roles are seldom recognised with protected time for scholarship amidst a heavy administrative burden. Other barriers include insufficient signposting to available career pathways and poor understanding of eligibility for such pathways. Enablers, identified by those who have had some success, include access to networks, role models and mentors.

Recognising that there will always be attrition within any career pathway, a larger incept cohort of individuals entering the pipeline can only improve the current situation, even if attrition remains constant. The Incubator has therefore considered how best to engage undergraduate students in ClinEdR and developed some simple advice for programme providers based on the experience of those most successful in this area.

Engaging with multiple stakeholders in a series of events has been key to how the Incubator is raising

the profile of ClinEdR. At a recent co-production event key national stakeholders across clinical professions collaborated to develop an approach to setting research priorities, along with establishing parameters of a system to support and influence in the long term. Activities to develop early career researchers and supervisors aim to create a critical mass of researchers and expertise.

Within dentistry, the impetus given by the Incubator has prompted the formalisation of the British Alliance of Researchers in Dental Education & Scholarship (BARDES) and connections of this group across Europe. Discussion with the Workforce, Training and Education Directorate of NHS England (formerly known as Health Education England), the UK Committee of Post-graduate Dental Deans and Directors and Dental Schools Council is also starting to pay dividend with greater acknowledgement of ClinEdR as a potential pathway in training.

The Incubator website will continue to help people to connect through our networks. Please consider visiting and adding your own details to our Directory, as we aim to become the national network for clinical educational researchers, from all professions, locations, and stages of training.

In doing so you will be supporting the development and growth of the ClinEdR community and ultimately enhancing improvement in oral health.