Day in the life of a research nurse

Clinical trials are medical research studies. They play an important role in the development of new services and treatments as their results show if patients will benefit and are carried out to answer specific questions about health and illness. Some are for healthy people whilst others involve patients receiving care and treatment for a medical condition.

Research nurses identify patients suitable to take part in clinical trials. They do this through screening clinics and attending meetings with the multidisciplinary team.

When a patient is suitable for a trial, the research nurse works with the patient’s clinician to provide information to help them decide if they want to take part. They then support the patient through the decision making process, and if the patient agrees to participate, they obtain written consent and enrol them into the trial.

One area of research nursing covers oncology (cancer). ABMU’s oncology research nurses are based in the cancer institute at the South West Wales Cancer Centre at Singleton Hospital.

Gill Palmer, Research Nurse Manager, said:

“The clinical trials we support investigate various ways to provide treatment such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy or hormone therapy. We are involved in local, national and international oncology clinical trials. Patients with different types of cancer are offered the opportunity to participate as part of their treatment.

“I really enjoy my job as I have a better understanding of how treatments evolve through research and become standard practice. Every day is varied. We could be identifying patients, meeting them to discuss their treatment options, looking at new trials or completing paperwork. It is a really worthwhile job which gives me great job satisfaction.”
The oncology research nurses have close links with Cancer Research UK (CRUK), especially as one of the nurses, Sian Whelan, is the senior CRUK nurse for Wales. Sian and Gill attend charity events to talk to and thank people who have raised money for research.

The National Institute of Health and Social Care Clinical Research Centre also provides nurses to support and develop research within ABMU Board.

As well as oncology, clinical trials are carried out in other areas of healthcare such mental health, hepatology (which looks at the liver, gallbladder and pancreas) and stroke.

Research nurse, Helen Thompson Jones, said:

“Our role differs from our colleagues in oncology because we cover a number of different disease areas. The role can be quite challenging as sometimes we only have a short window for a patient to decide to take part. For example, for a new stroke treatment, we may need patients who suffered their stroke only a few hours ago. It is important we still take the time to give patients, or their families, all the information they need to make a decision, making sure they know it is completely voluntary.

“Our work isn’t just limited to the hospital as we may have trials connected to care provided out in the community. This could mean visiting GP surgeries, community clinics or even patients’ homes.”

Once a patient is enrolled into the study, the research nurse ensures that the trial is carried out correctly and安排s the patient’s assessments, including treatment, x-rays or scans. They also take blood samples and in some cases process it using their specialist training. They carry out follow-up visits, collect all the required data and monitor a patient’s safety and wellbeing.

Helen added:

“It is really nice being at the forefront of research, knowing there are treatments being developed with the potential to make patients’ lives and health better. You are also able to build relationships with patients as you see them consistently through their treatment. Every day is different and I really love my job.”

Research nurses come from diverse nursing backgrounds. In order for them to carry out their role in clinical trials they have to demonstrate that
they are qualified by education, training and experience and undertake good clinical practice training every two years.

Also, they train and mentor new members of staff and give talks to student nurses, who are offered the opportunity to have a short placement with the research nurses.

Picture l-r: Helen Thompson Jones, research nurse; Gill Palmer, Research Nurse Manager; Sian Whelan, Cancer Research UK Senior Nurse