

NATIONAL NURSING RESEARCH STRATEGY FOR SOUTH AFRICA

Professor Dalena van Rooyen: Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and National Nursing Research Advisory Committee (NNRAC)

Abstract

FUNDISA has been actively promoting nursing research since its inception, but more rigorously over the last five years as the nursing profession moves into Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) where research is a priority. A National Nursing Research Advisory Committee (NNRAC) was elected to draft the National Research Strategy for South Africa for the relevant stakeholders involved: Universities, Nursing Schools, Public and Private Nursing Colleges, Health Services and Professional Societies. The aim of this research strategy is to enhance collaborative rigorous scientific enquiry that builds a significant body of knowledge in order to improve the health of the people of South Africa. The objective of this strategy will be achieved by building a research culture in nursing, building nursing research capacity and building research programmes across the country. It is envisaged that the research strategy will contribute significantly to directing future nursing research development in South Africa.

Keywords: Research strategy; NNRAC; NRF, HEI

Introduction

FUNDISA has been actively promoting nursing research since its inception, but more vigorously over the last five years. The organization held discussions with the National Research Foundation to improve the success rate of nurse scientists in the national rating, as well as the competitive grants process. In 2008 it did a review of the health research priorities of global and national organizations to assist the University schools in targeting their research strategies. In 2009 it accepted a position paper on research outlining the importance of this activity for university nursing schools. FUNDISA ran a workshop on NRF rating offered by the National Research Foundation and, as a result of this workshop, the idea emerged to develop a national strategy for nursing research.

Research has become a focus also for the nursing colleges, since there are plans to apply for registration as Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Being a HEI usually includes a research, as well as a teaching, mission and since nursing colleges have not traditionally developed in this area, this presents a new challenge.

The workshop to develop a national nursing research strategy therefore included the whole nursing education sector, as well as some nursing organizations. The initial workshop, attended by 45 nurses, was funded by the NRF and held in September 2011 at the University of Fort Hare in East London. At the workshop, FUNDISA's research portfolio Chair presented a survey that was undertaken to investigate the state of nursing research at South African Universities, and a presentation was also made on the

focus of nursing research. The stakeholders then discussed the problems and strategies in small groups. A National Nursing Research Advisory Committee (NNRAC) was elected to draft the strategy. This document is the product of their work, based on the input from the workshop and a series of consultations.

Vision

The National Nursing Research Strategy for South Africa is aimed at enhancing collaborative rigorous scientific enquiry that builds a significant body of knowledge in order to improve the health of the people of South Africa.

Assumptions

The NES group considers nursing research as critical and as demanding national action because the nursing profession:

- Believes in evidence-based practice;
- Has moved into higher education institutions (HEIs) over the last 40 years and thus it is incumbent on the profession to develop a research presence in HEIs;
- Is the best equipped for certain areas of health research because nurses are widely dispersed and have a contribution to make which no other discipline can do;
- Has the ability to develop the body of knowledge of nursing science in the full sphere of nursing and health care, including both biomedical and social sciences;
- South Africa is one of the few countries in Africa with a well-developed nursing research infrastructure, and therefore is uniquely placed to address nursing issues that impact on health and health care.

Nursing research focuses on:

- The clinical discipline of nursing;
- Nursing education and health service management;
- Health systems research;
- Health policy research; and
- Epidemiological research
- Implementation research in the health sector.

Introduction to the main strategies

The overall research strategy encompasses three main strategies, which include:

- Strategy 1: Building a research culture in nursing;
- Strategy 2: Building nursing research capacity; and
- Strategy 3: Building research programmes.

Each of the strategies will now be discussed, followed by a detailed strategic plan.

Strategy 1: Building a research culture

In this context, building a research culture includes encouraging nurses to read widely, focus on evidence-based practice, and to take part in research capacity-development programmes. It also requires health service and educational managers to make research accessible and to allow nurses the opportunity to participate in research activities. These managers need to provide mentoring, to showcase research at day-to-day events, and to track the implementation and evaluation of the research being undertaken.

Nursing in South Africa has a long professional history, but a relatively short history within academia and research. Therefore, a strong research tradition does not permeate nursing practice and education. Without a strong research culture, research does not flourish, since the access to research groups, recognition for research and researchers, access to funding and the utilisation of research is limited.

Strategy 2: Building nursing research capacity

Building research capacity involves mentoring, understanding funding streams and access to funding and grants. It involves accessing subsidies from the Department of Higher Education and Training for research, increasing the number of PhD graduates, electronic journal access, writing scientific articles for publication and writing policy briefs. It also includes the establishment of ethics committees and institutional research offices, thereby providing the necessary infrastructure to facilitate research capacity-development.

Currently, research is strongly focused on the completion of Masters and PhD qualifications with few independent research programmes. Therefore, academics are often only involved in research supervision and, on a limited scale, in the publication of articles with their students. Higher-level research capacity, such as the sourcing of funding, publishing in high impact journals and writing up policy briefs is seldom evident. A large proportion of nurses are not working in research-active environments, which limits their exposure to capacity-building interventions. This means that the potential of thousands of nurse educators and practitioners is lost to the country, as they are not engaged with helping to solve health problems and producing new knowledge in the field of nursing and health care.

Strategy 3: Building research programmes across the country

Once-off research, consisting of small projects, does little to contribute to the rapidly growing body of knowledge in the health field or to health policy. To make an impact, it is necessary to include more people in research studies and to cover larger geographic areas, while focusing on one theme over a number of years in order to build knowledge and influence policy. Institutions thus become recognised as having experts in a particular research area and can attract post-doctoral researchers who can play an important role in research programmes.

In order to influence policy and to build knowledge in the nursing domain, a sustained and focused research effort is essential. Such a research effort is captured in a research programme which may take five years or longer and which usually involves multidisciplinary collaboration/participation, including the involvement of a range of Masters and PhD students. A programme is usually led by a leading scholar who provides overall leadership for the programme and guides individual research projects.

There are currently very few established nursing research programmes in South Africa and no research units in Nursing Schools. However, there is one nurse-led unit funded by the MRC, which focuses on health promotion, and there is also another one which is in a health policy research unit. The challenge of developing sustained programmes with a high impact on practice, policy and capacity development should receive serious attention.

Detailed strategic plan

The detailed strategic plan highlights the aims as these pertain to the various stakeholders involved. These stakeholders include Universities, Nursing Schools, Public and Private Nursing Colleges, Health Services as well as Professional Societies.

Strategy 1: Building a research culture

1.1 Nursing Education Institutions (NEIs)

Expectation: The understanding, practice and utilisation of research will be given equal prominence in the life of nurse academics at NEIs as the teaching that is provided.

Every Nursing Education Institution will aim to:

- Have a strategic plan for research;
- Run journal clubs that make research results more accessible;
- Ensure module guides refer to research articles not older than two years;
- Actively advocate the use of evidence-based teaching in all modules;
- Write research expectations into job descriptions and actively use these indicators in performance management;
- Make provision for academic visits from research experts;
- Seek active collaboration with internationally established researchers; and
- Encourage the creation of research projects involving innovative teaching and learning strategies.

1.2 Health Sector

Expectation: The health sector needs to provide clinical researchers with access to data sources and to encourage the utilisation of research in practice.

Every health service in the health sector aims to:

- Increase Masters and PhD graduates among nurse specialist practitioners and managers in leading units by 20 % over the next five years;
- Ensure that 80% of all executive research summaries are shared with the healthcare settings in which the research was undertaken;
- Encourage the involvement of nurses and other health professionals in collaborative research projects;
- Invite clinicians to research events and hold such events in clinical settings;

- Provide Internet-linked computers in clinical settings with access to electronic academic journals; and
- Implement quality improvement strategies based on quality research.

1.3 Professional societies

Expectation: Professional societies will champion research by providing recognition for, and dissemination of, nursing research.

All professional societies aim to:

- Create opportunities for peer-reviewed publications;
- Develop new professional authors;
- Create opportunities for professional articles to be published;
- Create opportunities for research presentations at society meetings;
- Provide research fellowships or scholarships to promote nursing research in their particular field of interest; and
- Create opportunities for the recognition of nurse researchers.

Strategy 2: Building nursing research capacity¹

2.1 Nursing Education Institutions

2.1.1 Universities

Expectation: Nurse-academics should lead and participate in research programmes which address the priority health problems of the country and thoroughly prepare a new generation of nurse researchers.

University nursing schools aim to:

- Increase the number of mentors (mentors¹ and supervision) available at universities through strategies such as:
 - Using mentors from other relevant disciplines with expertise pertaining to the methodology or topic;
 - Using international short-term academic visitors;
 - Using Internet-based mentors.
- Improve the quality of mentoring of different components of research:
 - Differentiated mentorship development programmes;
 - Developing, implementing and reviewing clear policy guidelines on mentoring;
 - Use strong mentors and researchers from disciplines other than those relating to health.
- Improve the PhD preparation of the staff and students:
 - Use structured PhD preparation programmes such as SANTRUST to promote progress and throughput.
- Increase the peer review capacity of the staff (i.e. in regard to articles, grants, policy briefs, etc);

¹Mentor refers to a formal research mentor-mentee relationship, as well as to a research supervisory relationship.

- Offer structured short-learning programmes;
- Provide electronic programmes.

2.1.2 Nursing Colleges

Expectation 1: Lecturers should lead studies of evidence-based research to develop evidence-based guidelines at the end of the year so as to influence teaching and practice.

Nursing colleges aim to:

- Provide an electronic article search facility;
- Provide an Internet-linked computer for every classroom and academic;
- Ensure computer proficiency of all staff members through appropriate training;
- Teach lecturers to do systematic reviews and develop evidence-based guidelines.

Expectation 2: A proportion of educators will lead independent research and produce one article per year.

Nursing Education Institutions aim to:

- Ensure that the following infrastructure for doing research exists:
 - A research policy which outlines
 - Project approval processes;
 - Research funding accountability.
 - A Research Ethics committee with members appropriately trained.
 - A research office which can
 - Provide infrastructure and support for researchers;
 - Provide seed-funding for researchers.
- Increase the proportion of staff with Masters and PhDs.

2.2 Health sector

Expectation: Have an active Research and Development (R&D) Unit, including nursing research, which ensures that relevant research is undertaken and results implemented.

The health sector aims to:

- Have an R&D Unit which is actively involved in the implementation and evaluation of research, especially in large health services;
- Increased proportion of health service staff with Masters and PhDs;
- Specialist units are led by advanced nurse practitioners with Masters degrees;
- Specialist short courses on the evaluation and implementation of research are made available for clinicians.

2.3 Professional societies

Expectation: Have the capacity to provide an evidence-based input into policy-making and to understand the level of evidence for different interventions or strategies.

Professional societies aim to:

- Prepare members in the use of systematic reviews by means of short courses;
- Prepare policy briefs on issues in their own field.

Strategy 3: Building research programmes

Expectation: Research programmes on important health topics are ongoing in the various NEIs, professional societies and health services.

3.1 Nursing Education Institutions

Aim to:

- Identify and negotiate clear research themes based both on the critical mass of academics within the NEI and the level of national importance in order to assist academics in focusing their research;
- Create a conducive environment for leading scholars through sabbatical, as well as post-doctoral, opportunities and seed funding;
- Distribute workloads to provide leading scholars with more time for research and allocate postgraduate students to these scholars in order to strengthen the development of a research programme;
- Develop a structured research programme strategy across institutions to support leading scholars with their research;
- Utilise earmarked Thuthuka funding for six-year programmes. The Thuthuka programme is a National Research Foundation (NRF)-funded programme aimed at the development of the human research capacity at South African higher educational and research institutions, particularly among previously disadvantaged socio-economic groups (i.e. black, female and disabled researchers). The programme seeks to achieve this via the preferential funding of clearly-defined research projects conducted by individual researchers acting as grant holders responsible for the achievement of the stated research aims, as well as the logistical and financial management of the projects; and
- Promote the creation of endowed chairs to support nursing research programmes.

3.2 Professional societies

Aim to:

- Lobby for equitable access to research funding for nurse researchers; and
- Identify potential international funding sources and negotiate support for the National Nursing Research Strategy.

Evaluation of the strategic plan

This strategic plan can be evaluated by analysing the implementation of the specific strategies. However, the total plan has to be evaluated based on the following three indicators:

- Clear evidence of health policy being informed by nursing research;
- Clear evidence of a change in nursing practice based on nursing research; and
- The impact of such a policy and practice changes on health care.

Conclusion

The Strategic Plan is a document which should contribute significantly to directing future nursing research development. In some aspects it is perhaps too vague, for instance when talking of “a proportion” without indicating what this proportion is. However, such details should be gradually added by the particular stakeholder groups as each role-player fleshes out their own contribution to knowledge production.