

# Making research studies part and parcel of mental health services

**When mental health nurse Jon Lander started working for the Mental Health Research Network (MHRN), he knew nothing about research and had never heard of the organisation. Now part of his job is to act as the MHRN's ambassador, encouraging his colleagues working in community-based services to make research part and parcel of their everyday working lives. 'People on the ground have heard of research, but they don't know where it goes on, who does it, and how it is done,' he says.**

Jon is part of a pilot scheme launched by the MHRN's East Midlands plus South Yorkshire Hub that aims to change that state of affairs. He and his colleague Veronica French have both worked in a community mental health team (CMHT) in central Nottingham for the past decade.

Physically, they are still based there but they are now spending part of their time 'carrying a torch' for research. Their CMHT shares office space with a plethora of other community-based mental health teams and the two of them are able to discuss MHRN-supported research with colleagues



Jon Lander: actively encouraging his colleagues in community-based mental health services to support research and help identify potential participants.

from different teams on a regular, often informal, basis. Their role as 'research liaison nurses' is to talk about the value of research and introduce different projects and studies that are hoping to recruit participants via community-based services.

'It's about breaking barriers down between the two very different worlds of clinical work and research,' says Jon. 'We have easy access to psychiatrists, psychologists, other nurses and social workers who can refer people they are supporting to MHRN-supported studies. We are encouraging them to support research and help identify potential participants. We are also talking to service users about the value of research and explaining what the MHRN does and the projects it supports.'

The aim is to work towards making the concept of taking part in research trials in mental health the 'norm' for both professionals and the people they support.

The MHRN's full-time clinical studies officers (CSOs) work with mental health professionals and people with experience of mental health problems to the same end. Even though they are mostly based within mental health trusts, they are still often seen as 'outsiders', says David Kelly at the East Midlands plus South Yorkshire MHRN Hub. David is a CSO himself and has been overseeing the implementation of the pilot research liaison nurse scheme that was launched by the Hub at the end of 2010.

'It's the difference between approaching service managers from outside and already being part of a team,' he says. 'Research liaison nurses have a foot in both camps. Because they are already part of a clinical team, they have chance meetings with colleagues on an everyday basis and can talk about studies as a normal part of their work, not something extra.'

'They have easy access to colleagues through networks that have been built up over many years.'



**David Kelly: 'We realise that some mental health professionals will never have heard of the MHRN and don't know what we do.'**

They can spread the MHRN message and raise our profile among clinicians – we realise that some mental health professionals will never have heard of us and don't know what we do.'

Part of the research liaison nurse role is to find clinicians who might be interested in getting involved in studies as principal investigators: Jon and Veronica can describe the support the MHRN offers to people who take on this role, which many professionals fear may add to their workload. 'I think many people don't know what being a principal investigator on a research project involves, or the support we offer that makes it easy for them to do,' says David.

The remit of the research liaison nurses is also to identify people who could potentially participate in research studies: 'It may be easier for them to do that as they are combining working for us with a reduced clinical workload.'

The pilot scheme has been launched in collaboration with Nottinghamshire

Healthcare NHS Trust, the employer of Jon and Veronica. The secondments are supported by National Institute for Health Research 'flexibility and sustainability funding', and the pilot is being evaluated with a view to continuing and extending the scheme: the evaluation has already shown that research liaison nurses based on a ward are not as successful as those based in the community. 'We did originally include a ward-based mental health nurse in the pilot, but there are not as many studies that need to recruit people through a ward and there was more conflict between clinical demands and the role of research ambassador,' says David.

Veronica and Jon were both completely new to research and had to go on a steep learning curve at the beginning of their secondment. This included 'Good Clinical Practice' training, mandatory for everyone involved in research studies that recruit through NHS services.

'I was completely green,' says Jon. 'I have had to learn what the MHRN is, how it works, what the other research organisations do. I learned by going to meetings, attending seminars and reading up about different areas of research.'

The experience has made Jon enthusiastic about the value of research, though he says at times, the secondment has been a personal challenge. 'It has been a lot to learn, a lot to take in. There are so many different organisations involved in research locally, it has been hard to understand how they all fit together. It has been a great help doing this with Veronica as we have supported each other. It feels like it is a good time to be stepping into the world of research.'



The Mental Health Research Network is part of the National Institute for Health Research and supports studies in England.

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Published by the NIHR Mental Health Research Network  
April 2011  
NIHR MHRN Coordinating Centre  
Institute of Psychiatry, PO77  
De Crespigny Park, London SE5 8AF  
www.mhrn.info