

How Research Participation Shapes Speech and Language Therapists' Clinical Practice



C Hooper¹, J Patterson², C Heiberg³, J Canham³, TM Jones⁴, M Evans⁵, K Hamana⁶

1. Adult Speech and Language Therapy Department, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board. 2. School of Allied Health Professions & Nursing, University of Liverpool. 3. Centre for Trials Research, Cardiff University. 4. Liverpool Head and Neck Centre, University of Liverpool. 5. School of Medicine, Cardiff University. 6. School of Healthcare Sciences, Cardiff University.

Introduction

UK SLTs are currently involved in PATHOS (Post-operative Adjuvant Treatment for HPV-positive OPSCC), a clinical trial to investigate whether de-intensified adjuvant treatment improves swallowing outcomes while achieving equitable survival. SLTs play a key role in conducting standardised swallowing assessments, which are part of the primary and secondary endpoints of the trial. This is the first multi-centre head and neck cancer trial to engage SLTs on this scale.

Method

A qualitative study using on-line semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. Study information was circulated by the clinical trial manager. A topic guide was informed by the researcher's personal experience of PATHOS, a pilot interview and consultation with a specialist SLT with extensive experience in head and neck cancer. Seven UK-based SLTs involved in the PATHOS trial participated. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach.¹

Aim This project aimed to explore SLT perceptions of their involvement in clinical research and the impact of this on their clinical practice.

Results - Four Overarching Themes

1. Perceptions of Research Engagement

"...it's sort of endorsed the quality that we provide and that we're providing the level that's required"

"I think it has made people more aware of research, governance, of things like confidentiality, making sure that data's, you know, collected at certain time points"

Evolving Research Awareness & Skills

"I think it probably has given speech and language therapy a bit more of a platform to say the things that we've always known but give what we're saying perhaps a little bit more, credibility, I think."

Raised Professional Profile

2. Facilitators & Barriers to Research

"If you're not involved in research, then it's, you know, it's very difficult to know a way in."

Barriers: Insufficient Skills & Knowledge

"So I've gone on to do to be successful at getting a doctoral fellowship, so absolutely for me it's a huge kind of stepping stone for my research activity, which I'm incredibly grateful for"

Catalyst: Future Research Involvement

3. Impact on Clinical Practice

"we're quite surprised by some of the functional stuff that's happening in the early post-op stuff...that four-week mark."

Trial Driven Clinical Learning

"We have to do this, for PATHOS then...let's just use these for everyone. So just to be a bit more consistent across PATHOS and the caseload."

Trial Driven Change in Clinical Practice

4. Patient Centred Reflections

"...that biofeedback from the instrumental assessments and for them to learn a bit more about their swallow, learn a bit more about their treatment, I think that that it can only be a really positive, positive thing."

Enriched Patient Experience

Conclusion Participation in PATHOS provided a structured, standardised protocol for assessments that had a significant perceived impact, shaping clinical decision-making, fostering professional development and embedding evidence-based approaches into routine care. These findings reinforce the value of embedding research into clinical care for the benefit of the wider clinical caseload and aligns with existing literature suggesting that research active environments foster professional development and improve clinical decision making².

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References

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2. Newington, L., Alexander, C. M., & Wells, M. (2021). Impacts of clinical academic activity: Qualitative interviews with healthcare managers and research-active nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and pharmacists. *BMJ Open*, 11(10), e050679. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-050679>

Contact:
claire.hooper@wales.nhs.uk