

A Shortage of Nurse Researchers Looms

By Joyce Routson



A Career in Finding Solutions to Problems in Healthcare

By Joyce Routson, HEALTHeCAREERS.com

Would you be interested in finding ways to combat childhood obesity? How about discovering ways to make renal transplant patients sleep better? Or learning how genetics plays a role in recovery from traumatic brain injuries?

Those are all research projects headed up by nurses. A fascinating and wide-open career for nurses is that of research, now embraced by only a fraction of RNs.

Nurse researchers identify, design and conduct scientific studies on various aspects of healthcare, seeking to improve patient care by translating research into practice innovation.

Generally populated by nurses with PhDs, it is a specialty that has more possibilities than practitioners, says the nation's top researcher.

"There's a real shortage of nurse researchers and faculty," says **Dr. Patricia Grady**, PhD, RN, FAAN, director of the [National Institute of Nursing Research \(NINR\)](http://NationalInstituteofNursingResearch.org). Part of the [National Institutes of Health](http://NationalInstitutesofHealth.org), the organization is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

That's a good time to spread the word that the field needs more researchers to delve into important areas such as promoting health and preventing disease, improving quality of life, eliminating health disparities and setting directions for end-of-life research.

"The areas we're working in have a great impact on individuals' health across the country," she says. "It really is important that nurses think about this field."

Grady is a proponent that nurses who have a curious mind and are passionate about solving clinical problems consider advancing their education and become nurse researchers. While most have a PhD degree, she says that's not necessary to get started.

"Anyone can get experience working in a study," she says, "Talk to people who have programs, start collecting data. We encourage people who are thinking about research jump in early."

Nurse researchers may begin their careers in positions such as research assistant or clinic data coordinator. Generally they have a BSN and master's degree. They may or may not have taken some time between finishing a graduate program and embarking on doctoral studies.

Less than 5 percent of the nurses in the U.S. have PhDs and many work in schools of nursing. While a nurse researcher may work at a university, they also may be employed by research organizations, hospitals and laboratories.

Faculty positions usually start at the assistant professor level with an annual salary at around \$75,000.

Ann Minnick, PhD, RN, FAAN, senior associate dean for research at the [Vanderbilt University School of Nursing](#), says that there is greater demand for nurse researchers today because of evidence-based practice. "There is a huge interdisciplinary emphasis in healthcare organizations on how care can be delivered efficiently and effectively," she says.

The Affordable Care Act has directed more funding at comparative effectiveness research in an effort to better understand what works and what doesn't. The effort is designed to determine which treatments, diagnostic tests and public health strategies can accomplish the most good for people in general or for different groups within the population.

"Those are all areas that research nurses will be active in. But there is a shortage of nurse researchers and because of baby boomers retiring there are a huge number of openings," Minnick says.

Characteristics

What does it take to be a nurse researcher? "I always say the folks best-suited have a natural curiosity and are very tenacious," Minnick says. "Research studies can take several years to do and during that time there are not a lot of pats on the back so you have to be persistent."

She says researchers have to be organized and think like they are operating their own small business. "You have to get the money – that's a sales aspect. You are responsible for quality control, production, data collection and hiring."

Grady adds that besides an analytical bent, nurse researchers have to have good

communication skills to present their findings in journals, at scientific meetings and before community groups.

Most of the research projects are funded through universities or the NINR. Grady says there are about 300 grants awarded or ongoing per year. Some of the projects it is involved with can be viewed [here](#).

Grady says that nurses will "never run out of things to study and ways to improve the welfare of patients." She adds that the institution's website also has a condensed research course to give people interested in the field an idea of what's needed.