



Imperial College
Academic Health
Science Centre
Improving Patient Care



Prof Mary Wells

Lead Nurse for Research

RESEARCH: CANCER REHABILITATION AND SURVIVORSHIP

How did you get into research?

Doing an honours degree alongside my nurse training definitely influenced me to get into research, as I really enjoyed doing an ethnographic study of teamwork on a medical ward for my dissertation, and loved working with a knowledgeable and creative supervisor. After doing a Masters degree and publishing my first paper, I was really inspired to understand patients' experiences of cancer in more depth and to investigate how nurses could deliver care more effectively. I knew I wanted to do more research and saw that it gave me a very different perspective on practice. I was also lucky enough to get a job as a research practitioner, coordinating a novel trial of nurse-led vs medical follow-up in lung cancer. At the time, nurse-led research was quite unusual, and it was an amazing opportunity to work with an experienced and innovative team.

What do you enjoy about research?

Understanding issues and experiences in real depth. Looking at patient related issues in a different way. Finding out new insights and seeing how they could help inform practice. I enjoy working within a multidisciplinary research team and with real experts in the field, and it's great to present results and new ideas at international conferences. Data analysis can be fun and rewarding too!

What was the most difficult aspect of doing your PhD?

For me, settling on exactly what I was going to do was a real challenge. And because I started my PhD when I was already an experienced nurse, I found it quite difficult to be a 'junior' academic. I also had a very young family when I started, so I spent a lot of time juggling, and feeling guilty that I wasn't being a proper mum. Being a PhD student can be quite isolating, especially when you are doing complex analysis and writing up. I found I lost confidence and struggled with self belief that my work was any good. My supervisors were amazing and really kept me inspired and on track.

What difference has your research training and experience made to your career?

It's hard to put that into words as it has made a huge difference. I don't think I ever thought I would be a Professor! My research training

has helped me to engage confidently with senior academics and clinicians. It's made me a more critical and a strategic thinker, and has really suited my values of integrity, collaboration and rigour. I also think it's improved my organisational skills and my attention to detail (although sometimes I can be too much of a perfectionist).

How has research changed your clinical practice?

It's made me very aware of the rapidity with which evidence changes and the degree of uncertainty which often exists in the evidence in relation to clinical practice. I suppose what I am saying is that research training forces you to be adaptable and attuned to understanding evidence critically. Research also makes you more aware of the degree to which data are fully representative (or not) of the people and contexts we face in daily practice and to think about 'outliers' and individual patient perspectives as well as the majority.

What has made a difference to progressing your research career?

Definitely working with great mentors, and having different research experiences ie of different designs and teams. Education and training has been crucial to my MSc and PhD taught me so much. Presenting and publishing. is very important as it forces you to communicate clearly and to engage in academic debate and critique and when you get external affirmation that your research is good, you start to believe it!

Where do you see your clinical academic career going over the next five years?

That's a really interesting question. I have already worked as a full time Professor in a University, and am now back in the NHS leading the development of clinical academic nurses and midwives. Perhaps a national role? But if not I would like to be in a position of directly influencing nursing practice as a nurse director, or specifically working in a cancer-focussed senior research role, where I can really use my clinical knowledge and expertise◆

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