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The Pied Piper of Research: Increasing Clinical Research Capability for Mental Health Services in Somerset

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Background

Somerset does not have a local University or formal academic connections, and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust has been historically lacking in mental health research resource and output despite a culture of innovation (HSJ, 2021). The pandemic brought local research delivery in mental health to almost a complete standstill (SFT, 2023). Despite this, in an April 2023 'away morning' we found a large appetite for clinicians to get involved in research, including a wish to be part of cutting-edge studies, to enhance the richness and variety of clinical work, and to offer additional opportunities to our patients. We aimed to translate this interest into formal research capacity and activity.

Method

One author (AH) took on a Peninsula South West Clinical Research Network (CRN) funded Research Associate role and collaborated with the local Research and Development team. We focussed on giving clinicians experience of the research process to build up skills and experience. This began with supporting clinicians to take part in existing National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) portfolio studies; alerting us to eligible patients, training in recruitment and assessment, and taking on formal roles including Principal Investigator (PI), Co-PI and join the new NIHR Associate PI scheme. We set up a monthly meeting for clinicians about existing and upcoming research, involving them in decisions about which studies to support, having clinical discussions about common issues across the service, and hearing about each other's research interests. We also worked with senior clinicians to identify completed projects and evaluations which they have lacked time to write up and we are supporting 'writing clinics' for more junior staff to take on and publish.

Results

Between April and September 2023 we engaged 90 additional clinicians in mental health research within Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, increasing research capability amongst clinicians and working towards infusing discussions about research and patient eligibility in every part of the mental health services. With the support of our newly engaged wider community we have more than doubled our portfolio of recruiting trials and opportunities for our patients are now becoming common place in clinical practice.

Conclusion

We have made a large expansion to our clinical research capacity and workforce in Somerset NHS Foundation Trust. Enthusiastic and positive clinical leadership has been important in motivating other clinicians to collaborate and develop new skills and this has been possible through the CRN Research Associate scheme. Once we have a critical mass of skilled and experienced clinicians in the research process, we then hope to build our own local research programme in areas of clinical expertise. Somerset is a blended NHS Trust including both mental and physical health care services with potential for becoming national leaders and innovators.

References

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