WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A HEALTHCARE CHAPLAIN TO ENTER INTO RESEARCH?

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Abstract: In this personal eye view article Alister shows how the engagement with research leads to reflective practice and greater support for practice. He gives an account of his own journey into research and the advantages that this has given him in terms of his working life. I am just one of a few chaplains who have taken up research as part of our work. As a member of the newly formed Spiritual Care National Research Development Group, I have been asked to share my research journey, thus far, to reveal what it might mean for other chaplains should they consider research for part of their work. In regards to my research background, I have published a couple of articles. One of these was reporting on an audit concerning staff training needs for spiritual care, while the other was on the spiritual needs of children in hospice. I am currently working on a PhD where I am researching the insights gained from using an age-appropriate spiritual assessment tool with children in hospital.

In the early days of my chaplaincy, I was aware through my practice, that I could have either adopted an anecdotal approach to change or rather used research as a means of influence and act as an agent of change that was both meaningful and relevant within only a few years. In the past, I held preconceived ideas that research was for scholarly individuals focusing on theory, and as a result of such focus, lost touch with people. However, I have become increasingly conscious of the culture change over the past 10 years of how healthcare chaplaincy can no longer perceive research as an option but as a necessity. It is important, at whatever level of research embarked upon, that chaplains engage with it, in order to be a credible profession in an evidenced based culture.

Chaplains can reap through their research experience professional competencies that help conduct their work. The journey of research provides the opportunity to learn new skills. It can become a natural expression of your professional development, whether that be as simple a skill as, using a camcorder to record interviews, to more sophisticated skills such as writing for submission to a professional journal, or learning how to use research software to record and analyse data.

When you take on research it broadens your knowledge base. In relation to my own project, I have had to study several new subjects, one of which was psychology. The benefit of this does not just apply exclusively to the research I’m conducting, but enables me to apply this knowledge base into my professional practice. It helps me to be more astute in a multiple disciplinary manner, as I increasingly appreciate the thinking in other disciplines, and the distinctive contribution we bring as healthcare chaplains.

Some levels of research require applying for funding and ethical approval in order to gain permission, time and equipment. While this can be tedious and mind taxing, it forces you, as a researcher, to think meticulously through the ethics, purpose and worth of your research and also how well your knowledge integrates, not just in the field you hope to research, but also in how well it relates to the fields of enquiry you may work alongside. However, when success comes the rewards are satisfying and fulfilling.

Research may also be isolating, as study requires times of solitary activity and so chaplains will find themselves oscillating between working on their own and with others. This requires a conscious adjustment, when, times of research offer emotional rest from pastoral care, and pastoral care alleviates the tedium of research detail with the vitality of working with people. This rhythm can offer a positive pattern for a chaplain to sustain both the intensity of research and spiritual care.
The research journey has helped me immensely to reflect on my work. In my current research I have had to conduct interviews with children. While I had focused on discovering more about the spirituality of children, I had underestimated how much I would need to reflect on the manner and style of my own working practice. This has therefore raised the importance of reflexivity and the research journey has encouraged me to practice this more, reflecting in practice and not just on practice.

It is important in a healthcare research journey to develop a network of support. Certain research projects require this, whether a supervisor or a team and there is good reason for this, as it offers the support and the verifiability for the process. In my own location, I benefited from the Yorkhill Research and Practice Development Unit which was used by the nursing staff. The seminars and training available prepared me and enabled my thinking to engage with research with a renewed mindset that understood the tools available and how they were to be appropriately used. Therefore, I had to be more informed about methodology such as “qualitative” or “quantitative” study. This information is much more accessible for healthcare chaplains through organisations such as NHS Education and Mowat Research.

Research is also a journey about sharing and supporting. While a researcher has to negotiate the ins and outs of intellectual property, the end goal is for shared knowledge. It is important to publish. This sends the right message to the research culture we want to become a part of. It demonstrates that this research journey is not just to help ourselves, but also the profession to which we belong and the people we care for. It is to save others the time that you have spent so they can, with confidence, pursue an approach based on the evidence of our research. Therefore, the agenda for research, needs to gather momentum so that it is not seen as just a tool to survive, where we are trying to justify our existence, but is one that helps us to thrive in a healthcare context that engages in patient care in a relevant manner and with a skilled approach that brings healthcare chaplaincy more clearly into a place which is key in the delivery of patient care.

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