

The Research Journey: Worth the Trip!



Please introduce your current role, and the extent to which it involves research

I am an Advanced Radiation Therapist at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane. Complimentary to this position, I am our department's research representative meaning that I provide support and act as a mentor for Radiation Therapists in our department undertaking or interested in undertaking research. This role also entails promoting various research activities throughout the department, including training and education opportunities as well as seminars and conferences, and representing the department at our Queensland Statewide RT Research Leadership meetings.

How and why did you become involved in research?

My involvement in research commenced somewhat accidentally. It began by a desire to improve the side effects experienced by patients during treatment for anal canal cancer. A group of us developed a new technique, adapted from what we had read in literature, aiming to reduce the dose delivered to surrounding healthy tissue. To demonstrate to both the Radiation Oncologists and Radiation Therapists that this technique resulted in at least comparable or improved target volume coverage whilst reducing dose to surrounding healthy tissue, we conducted a small retrospective dosimetric comparison study. Without necessarily realising it, a research project had been born! We were then able to publish the results of our study so that others could read about our experiences. The most rewarding part was to observe the positive effect the implementation of this new technique had on our patients, achieving our primary aim.

This inspired me to continue my research journey and keep striving to answer the clinical questions that arise in the workplace to improve our practices and ultimately benefit the patients we treat. In my personal journey, it has been both valuable and encouraging to see, meet and network with other Radiation Therapists who share a common interest in research so it is exciting to see the establishment of the Australian and New Zealand Medical Radiations Research Network (ANZMRRN) and be a part of it.

What are your main areas of research interest?

I have two main areas of research interest: head and neck cancer and anal canal cancer. My interest in head and neck

cancer initially began with head and neck immobilisation, beginning with conducting an evidence-based practice review and then progressing to small quality improvement studies investigating various devices available in our department. These smaller studies have led to my current project, undertaking PhD research in the area of adaptive radiotherapy for head and neck cancer. This work has enabled me to collaborate with both Radiation Therapists and Radiation Oncologists across three radiotherapy departments in Brisbane, which I have found to be a great experience.

I have described previously how I became interested in anal canal cancer and this initial experience afforded me the opportunity to be involved in the anal canal cancer IMRT expert sub-group for the TROG ANROTAT project. This enabled me to network with and learn from an array of people from various disciplines, many of whom had quite extensive research backgrounds. This was an experience from which I learned a great deal, enjoyed immensely and have been able to build my research network. My involvement in this project inspired me to commence a pilot study in our department for anal canal cancer patients that is currently in its development phase.

Are you attending the MedRad Forum?

I plan to attend the MedRad Forum and am looking forward to hearing about the great work that is being conducted around Australia by radiation professionals. This is a wonderful initiative to provide people with the opportunity to not only share their work on a broader scale but also to collaborate with and receive support and feedback from other professionals with similar interests. It is also an important event to recognise the quality research that is happening in our profession throughout the country. Sharing our experiences and results through publication and presentation at various forums such as MedRad can only serve to strengthen our profession, benefit individuals and contribute to the delivery of the best quality services to our patients.

What is your opinion of the role of research within radiation therapy and diagnostic imaging?

Research has always and continues to be an extremely important aspect of the medical radiation profession.

Whether we realise it or not, research of some shape or form is an integral part of our regular work practice: from quality improvement projects, audit and assessment of techniques and procedures, protocol development, introduction of new technologies and clinical trials, development of new techniques, through to more formalised research projects. All of these different types of research are foundational to us moving forward as a profession.

Why do you think it is important for practitioners to be actively involved in research projects?

I believe the importance for practitioners to be involved in research primarily lies in the benefit that it holds for the patients we see and treat. This in turn benefits the departments in which we work. Involvement in research also has numerous benefits for the individual practitioner. It broadens and deepens your professional knowledge and understanding, it equips you with and develops skills both in the clinical realm and outside it (e.g. project management, report writing, statistics) and it adds an extra dimension to your job satisfaction.

What are some of the challenges you have faced in your research career?

The biggest challenge for me has been to remain positive and keep moving forward when things aren't progressing as I had anticipated or when I have been feeling lost and overwhelmed. Research can be quite daunting when you first start out but I have been fortunate to have people around me who gave me the encouragement and confidence to give it a go and who have guided me along the way. The other ever-present challenge is that of time and finding that magic 'work-life balance'! I don't know that I have successfully achieved it yet but I try to make sure that what is truly important always stays at the top of my priority list.

Are there any issues relating to research that you think are a concern?

I think it is important to continue to raise people's awareness and increase recognition of the research that has been done and continues to happen in the medical radiation profession. This will be of benefit not only to us within the profession but also assist in raising the profession's public profile. I think we also need to be wary of not undervaluing the great research work (in all its various forms) that we do.

Are there areas in the medical radiation sciences that you think would particularly benefit from further research?

I think in this current climate, research projects that include or specifically involve health economic and cost-benefit analyses of new technology and techniques are beneficial in ensuring our patients continue to receive the best quality treatment and our departments are well supported in providing these services.

Do you have any advice for other researchers?

My first piece of advice would be that if you are interested in getting involved in research, just go for it! There is nothing to lose and everything to gain. Be passionate about your research topic and surround yourself with a good research team who you have good relationships with and who are as passionate about your area of research as you are. The ANZMRRN provides a wonderful forum for people to network with other like-minded professionals who can provide you with support and guidance. The research journey is not always one travelled on a smooth road but arrival at its destination is more than worth the trip.

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ANZMRRN

Medical Radiation Professionals interested in or doing research are encouraged to access the Australian and New Zealand Medical Radiations Research Network (ANZMRRN) as a forum to connect, support and inspire each other where there is a common interest in the pursuit of research and evidence-based practice.

This forum is designed to connect researchers irrespective of where they are on the research journey, from all over Australia and New Zealand. To read more about the network, visit www.anzmrrn.org!

