

My journey into research - Sue Dean

Background

I'm a registered nurse working as an advanced practitioner (AP) at Pilgrim Hospital, Boston, working with patients referred to Same Day Emergency Care (SDEC).

I'm in the third year of a PhD at the University of Nottingham, funded through an NIHR Doctoral Fellowship. I also hold an Honorary Research Fellow position. My doctoral research explores clinical outcomes and patient experiences in acute medical SDEC, using a multi-phase mixed methods design. I'm passionate about improving services, strengthening patient safety, and supporting the development of clinical academic roles within nursing and advanced practice.

I've always been curious, even as a child, and that instinct to understand how things work has stayed with me. Reading, learning, and exploring new topics are things I naturally gravitate towards, and they've shaped the way I approach both clinical practice and research.

Tell us about your experience with research

My career has been shaped by a desire to improve care and a willingness to take on roles that broaden my perspective. Over time I developed interests in service improvement and leadership. In 2021 I became a pre-doctoral clinical academic fellow. That fellowship gave me protected time, mentorship, and initial training in research methods. That experience helped me understand how research fits alongside clinical practice and gave me the confidence to apply for doctoral funding.

Securing an NIHR Doctoral Fellowship in 2024 allowed me to dedicate most of my time to research while maintaining clinical practice. I've had extensive training in quantitative and qualitative methods, medical statistics, epidemiology, health economics, and mixed-methods integration. This training transformed how I think, how I analyse problems, and how I understand evidence. It also made research feel accessible and achievable, rather than something reserved for academics outside clinical practice.

Being involved in research and innovation has changed the way I practise. I'm more reflective, more analytical, and more aware of the evidence behind clinical decisions. My doctoral work has strengthened my understanding of patient flow, outcomes, and experience in SDEC, and it has shaped how I approach service development, governance, and quality improvement. What I've enjoyed most is seeing ideas turn into tangible improvements.

What would you tell other people interested in getting involved in research?

My advice to anyone thinking about getting involved in research or innovation is to start with a question that genuinely matters to you. You don't need to wait for a perfect idea

or a formal research role. Many meaningful projects begin with curiosity, a small observation, or a sense that something could work better for patients or staff. Research and innovation are not separate from clinical practice; they grow out of it. Research can feel intimidating from the outside, but it isn't. You don't have to be very clever to do it; you just have to be persistent. Curiosity, consistency, and a willingness to learn will take you further than you think.

I would also encourage people to seek support early. There are networks, supervisors, and programmes that can help you shape your ideas and build confidence. You don't have to know everything at the start. Most of us learn by doing, and the skills develop over time. Being open to learning, asking questions, and connecting with others makes the journey much easier. It's also important to remember that research is collaborative. You don't have to carry a project alone, and you shouldn't try to.

Clinical academics come from all backgrounds, and there is space for many more nurses and APs to take up these roles. I hope my journey shows that it's possible to grow into research gradually, and that it can sit alongside clinical practice in a way that strengthens both.

Sue would like to help create opportunities for other clinicians to engage with research, whether through supervision, teaching, or collaborative projects. If you would like to contact Sue, you can do so via email: sue.dean11@nhs.net

