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## PENG: SUPPORTING MEMBERS IN RESEARCH AND AUDIT ACTIVITIES



**In the second article from the Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition Group (PENG) of the British Dietetic Association (BDA), Jacklyn Jones, takes a look at how PENG helps to improve engagement of dietitians in research and audit activities in order to encourage clinically effective practice.**

There are increasing pressures across healthcare for all disciplines to demonstrate that they are clinically effective. Dietitians are not an exception to this. Indeed, there is a clear expectation that all dietitians should be involved in activities including audit<sup>1</sup> and whilst this is also true of research, there is an acknowledgement that the level of research involvement will vary between dietitians. This can range from understanding, interpreting and applying research, through to leadership over significant research programmes and research supervision of others.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of being involved in research, audit, quality improvement and service development activities cannot be overstated in the current NHS, where evidence-based practice and outcomes are key priorities. This is, however, against the backdrop of healthcare workers having increasingly busy workloads resulting in the focus being on day-to-day patient care, with research and audit often seen as an addition to, rather than part of, current roles. This may explain why there have been reported barriers to dietitians participating in research and audit<sup>3,4</sup> and so helping overcome these barriers is key to improving engagement of dietitians in research and audit activities. If dietitians of all grades and at all stages of their career do not engage in research, audit, service evaluation and quality improvement activities, they will not be

in a position to demonstrate that they are clinically effective practitioners.

The cornerstone to clinically effective practice is ensuring that the service provided by healthcare practitioners is evidence-based, i.e. is founded on a strong research base and that measuring the care given provides a means to demonstrate the quality of the service, i.e. is subject to regular audit. Basing care on these principles provides dietitians with the opportunity to deliver the best care for their patients whilst delivering value for money.

Due to ongoing developments in healthcare, dietitians can often find themselves in a position where they may be unsure how to best manage a patient and often searching the literature does not provide the full answers to the questions we have. These shortfalls, however, could be turned into opportunities to undertake work to fill the gaps in the evidence base.

Many dietitians have expressed an interest in being more involved in research and audit, but anecdotal evidence suggests that, for many people, taking those first steps into research can be daunting. In addition, many people will have a plethora of patient data which would be of interest to other dietitians, but this information is often not shared as people may not know the best way to disseminate this information.

In light of these findings, PENG set out to better support members to

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overcome some of the barriers to engaging with research and audit to enable us, as a profession, to further develop the evidence base around nutrition support. To help facilitate this, the PENG committee was restructured in February 2014 to include a small core committee supported by a number of clinical lead roles. My role is to act as clinical lead for research and audit. The focus of this role is to support PENG members to develop their research and audit skills and in turn to enhance the evidence base in the area of nutrition support. In view of this and based on PENG's commitment to promoting excellence in nutrition support, enabling the PENG membership to develop and increase research and audit activities was considered a key strategic goal.

The committee and Clinical Leads worked together to develop a research strategy that would guide our activities. The first aim identified was to establish current engagement in research and audit type activities of PENG members, to determine the barriers to undertaking these activities and to establish the need for support mechanisms for members to become more engaged. An online survey was developed by the PENG committee and circulated to all PENG members in April 2014. Sixty nine of 386 PENG members completed or partially completed the survey and of these, all agreed or strongly agreed that audit was an important component of the role of a dietitian. Fewer respondents (n=60 (87%)) agreed or strongly agreed that research was an important component of a dietitian's role. The majority of respondents (n=65 (97%)) were, or had been involved in audit and 46% (n=31) were or had been involved in research. Of those people who reported that they had never been involved in research and audit the main reasons were lack of time (n=11), lack of confidence (n=5), lack of critical appraisal skills (n=4) and lack of support (n=4). The survey also found that results of research, audit and service evaluation activities

were generally disseminated locally within dietetic departments (n=50), via articles for local newsletters or oral and poster presentations at a local meetings (n=44), with fewer respondents disseminating results as an oral presentation or a poster nationally (n=30) or internationally (n=13). The majority of respondents (n=44 (72%)) stated that they would like to be more involved in research and audit and 64% (n=40) reported that they had an idea for a project in the area of nutrition support but they had not yet started it. Almost all respondents indicated that they would value support in undertaking such projects and the most commonly cited areas of support were funding for backfill (n=54 (78%)), help with statistical analysis (n=42 (61%)), help with writing proposals (n=33 (48%)), help with writing for publication (n=31 (45%)), along with a variety of other related activities. (Full results of this survey are available in e-penlines autumn/winter 2014.)

The results from the survey were utilised to shape and inform the research and audit activities of PENG. To this end, PENG ran a very successful study day in November 2015 covering many aspects of undertaking research, audit and service evaluation projects. The day included three key note presentations. Dr Judy Lawrence, BDA Research Officer provided a succinct overview of the national facilitators for research and audit which included sources of funding which could help with salary backfill and the execution of studies. She also emphasised the assistance available from BDA Head Office. Mel Baker, Senior Specialist Dietitian, Leicester Intestinal Failure and Feeding team, gave an eloquent overview of her journey in the research arena, including her success in securing an NIHR grant and PENG funding. Anne Holdoway provided excellent tips on effective presentations to enable participants to consider how they might effectively communicate their results and key messages.

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In addition to these keynote presentations, the six PENG award winners shared the results of their research and audit projects which covered a range of nutrition support topics. These presenters had all been awarded one of the annual PENG education awards which are supported by industry (Nutricia, Fresenius-Kabi, Abbott). The projects presented illustrated the breadth of the profession's work and provided excellent examples for the audience on the fruits of one's labour. The remainder of the day was a facilitated workshop where the delegates enthusiastically participated in activities to turn data into abstracts and reports. The day was evaluated highly and many delegates were motivated to return to their work place and either commence projects or to consider the dissemination of results from previous projects. It will be great to see the publication of some of these projects.

In addition to the study day, other initiatives have been developed to support the PENG membership in research and audit activities. One development is the provision of small project grants. PENG now awards small grants to their members to undertake research, audit and service evaluation in the area of clinical nutrition and nutrition support. PENG members can apply for money to support aspects of running a project including project costs, equipment, consumables, help with backfill and even to support study at post graduate level. These should be in the area of clinical nutrition or nutrition support. In the past year, one PENG member (Mel Baker) has been successful in securing £4,100 to undertake a retrospective audit of the management of high output stomas. Mel is currently working on the

audit and will provide a report to PENG and hopefully present and/or publish the results when the study is complete. More details of this scheme are available to PENG members on the PENG website: [www.peng.org.uk](http://www.peng.org.uk)

A further initiative is the development of a mentorship scheme. The membership survey identified that whilst many PENG members would like formal training in research and audit type activities, many stated that they would find it beneficial to have an individual point of contact to ask specific questions about the research and audit process. Experienced researchers have volunteered to become mentors and offer help and support to those people who have requested it. This scheme is in its infancy, but the intention is to match mentors with people looking for support, either based on areas of expertise or by location - whichever is the most appropriate. It is envisaged that mentors could provide ongoing support over longer periods, or could provide one-off pieces of advice/support.

These initiatives are the beginning of what is hoped to be ongoing work by the PENG committee to respond to the needs of the PENG membership and to support them in developing their practice. It is fabulous to see so many PENG members already engaged in research and audit activities and to see many more becoming involved. These are exciting times for dietitians to be involved in research and audit activities and there are significant opportunities for the profession to develop their practice and demonstrate that we provide a fundamental service within a health and social care environment.

#### References

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