



# The ROYAL COLLEGE of OPHTHALMOLOGISTS

## Ophthalmic Research by All

### Why all ophthalmologists must develop and nurture their research interests

**Authors:** Academic Sub-committee RCOphth January 2022

#### **‘Generating and applying robust evidence from research is the single most important way in which we improve healthcare’**

A major culture change is underway in the NHS, initiated by the Department of Health and Social Care (**DHSC**) and supported by all our devolved nations<sup>i</sup>, that now expects that all clinicians to be involved in research. The concept of embedding clinical research at the heart of patient care is not a new – it is indeed part of our NHS constitution<sup>ii</sup>. However, the global pandemic has demonstrated the clear link between research and improved patient outcomes<sup>iii</sup>. So the UK government is doubling down on its commitment to research **in general, and delivery of clinical research within the NHS in particular.**

The NHS Forward Plan articulates the ambition of one million people being registered as interested in taking part in research by 2024 **and the DHSC has set out its vision in ‘Future of UK Clinical Research Delivery: 2021-2022 Implementation Plan’<sup>iv</sup>** in which five key themes include:

- **clinical research embedded in the NHS** via a research positive culture in which all health staff feel empowered to support and participate in clinical research as part of their job
- **a sustainable and supported research workforce** – via offering opportunities and exciting careers for all healthcare and research staff of all professional backgrounds

To ensure all patients have access to research, and to address healthcare inequality, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) will review departmental research output. In essence, delivering research is now everyone’s business across the NHS, and research will be built into revalidation requirements for all doctors<sup>v</sup>.

## What can my College do for me?

The RCOphth believes that ophthalmic and vision sciences research is the cornerstone of delivering innovation in the eye health care and in eradicating eye disease, and should be promoted and protected accordingly. It is therefore committed to **supporting its members' involvement in research** across the spectrum from discovery science to translation.

This document describes the College's activities in relation to providing **information and support to NHS ophthalmologists** (trainees and consultants) in their efforts to improve patient outcomes by embedding research into clinical care. It also makes the case for an increase in ophthalmic clinical research activity, and outlines the resources necessary for this within the **strategic plans of NHS trusts**.

The College's companion position statement '[Advancing Academic Ophthalmology](#)', describes RCOphth's work to support clinical academics and academic ophthalmology as the subspecialty that is central to ophthalmic and vision sciences research.

## What does it mean to be a research-active ophthalmologist?

Participation by NHS ophthalmologists in research takes many forms. These include leading projects, being a local principal investigator for a multi-centre study, recruiting patients for clinical trials, submitting data to epidemiological studies such those conducted via BOSU, identifying research questions and supporting colleagues running projects. It also includes developing innovations and translating and implementing research.

The RCOphth values of *all* these contributions. It seeks to engender a culture in which **ophthalmic research is part of core clinical practice** for *all* ophthalmologists, in keeping with Government policy<sup>vi</sup>.

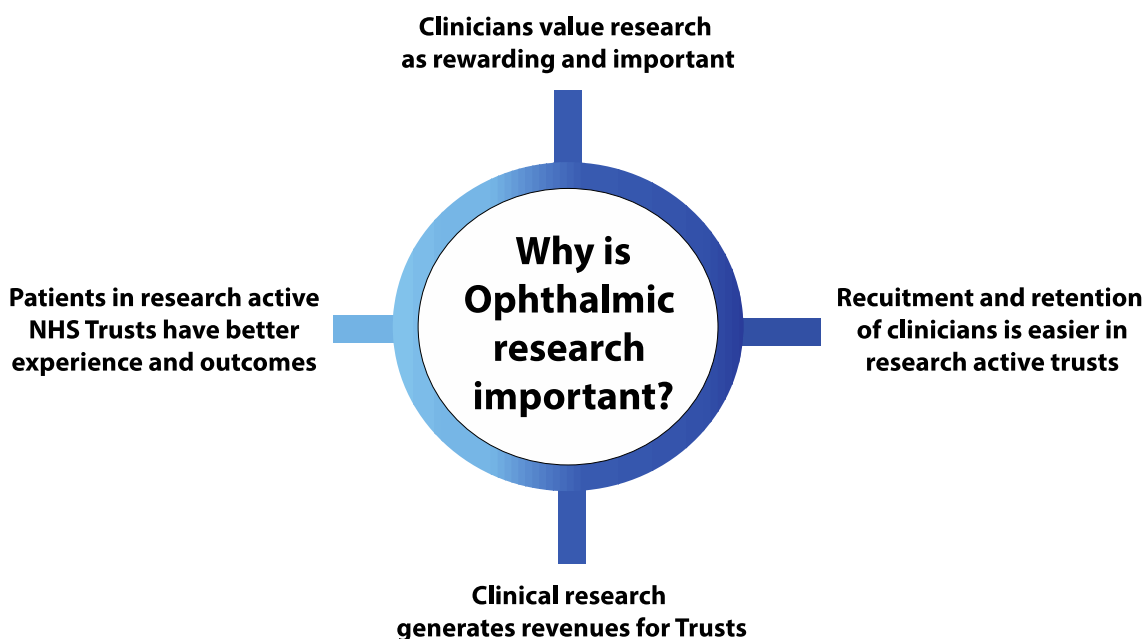


Fig 1. The importance of clinical research is now well evidenced<sup>vii, viii, ix, x, xi, xii, xiii</sup>

## What are the key barriers to participation in research by ophthalmologists?

Many doctors find research intellectually stimulating and adds to their job satisfaction but there is a **lack of support in terms of resources and protected time** for research activity. Ophthalmology brings additional challenges, due to the need to commit time for surgical sessions and high volume outpatient clinical activity<sup>xiv</sup>. The powerful recommendations by RAND Europe (Fig 2) to ensure effective NHS staff involvement with research will require genuine commitment, resource and a fresh approach. Notably the report highlights the **neglect of NHS staff involvement in research** compared to the efforts to improve *patient and public* engagement in health research.

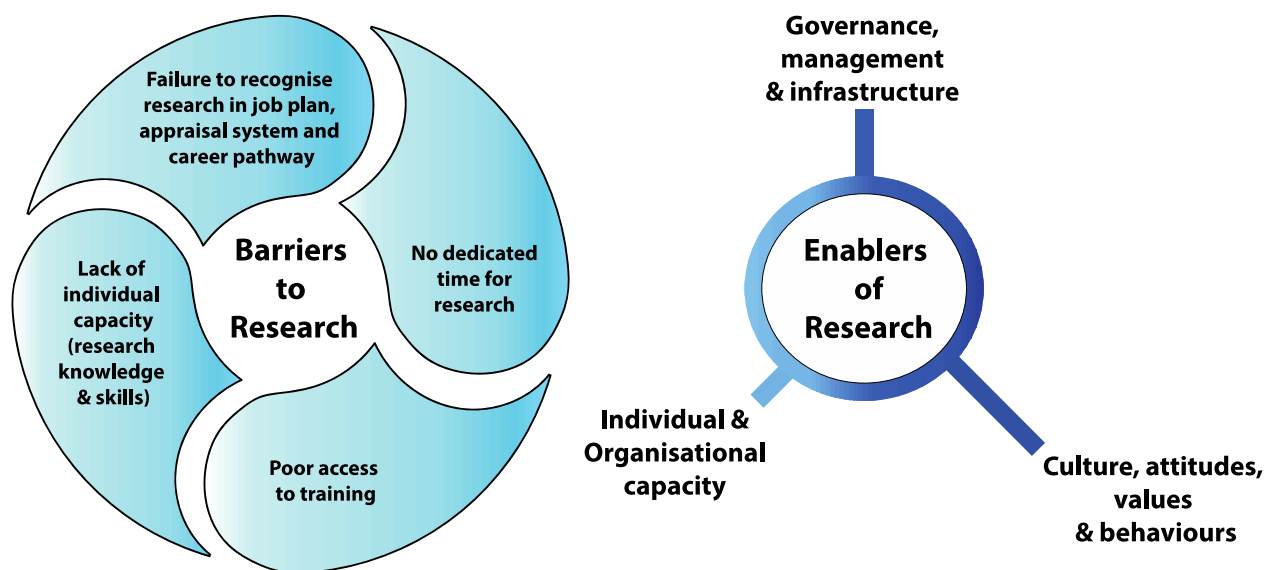


Fig 2. Findings from RAND Europe report commissioned by The Healthcare Improvement Studies (THIS) institute<sup>xv</sup>

Significant progress has been made in the past decade in the level of NHS research activity, largely due to NIHR funding for patient-facing health research, such that all Trusts in England support NIHR studies<sup>xvi</sup>. But this increased research activity has not been uniform, so addressing regional variations is now a priority for Government, so that activity better aligns with disease burden, rather than being concentrated in large centres with mature academic infrastructure<sup>xvii</sup>. This presents an important opportunity for NHS ophthalmologists who are not currently/recently research active.

## What is the RCOphth doing to facilitate clinical research becoming part of core clinical practice for ophthalmologists?

The RCOphth is:

- Recognising and emphasising the value of participating in research as 'core activity' for all in its Strategic Plan and all its activities
- Continuing to run the British Ophthalmological Surveillance Unit as a means of enabling NHS ophthalmologists to both contribute to and undertake research
- Providing or signposting appropriate research training opportunities for all ophthalmologists at every stage through its various educational events/offerings for example the RCOphth Evidence Based Ophthalmology Course, via the RCOphth website and through other communications
- Providing a comprehensive information the [RCOphth website](#) on how to get involved in all aspects of research
- Working with the GMC to ensure the OST curriculum, in which new core skills relating to generating and applying research evidence are now embedded alongside other core skills, is delivered to meet the needs of future consultants to participate effectively in research and use research evidence to inform practice
- Developing metrics for ophthalmologists to use to measure/evidence their research participation for the purposes of revalidation
- Raising awareness of the benefits of ophthalmic research to patients and the general public, through the RCOphth website and other activities
- Using the RCOphth AAC checklist to advocate job plans for new consultant posts that protects clinical research time and ideally, within direct clinical care programmed activities, to align with recommendations from other Medical Royal Colleges.
- Calling on Trusts to facilitate research and its translation into practice in keeping with Government policy and initiatives from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges<sup>xviii</sup> by:
  - a) making research activity integral to their organisation and ensuring its oversight by the Trust Board through development and implementation of a Trust Research Strategy
  - b) recognising clinical research as 'core clinical activity' for all ophthalmologists (as per CQC Well-Led Framework)
  - c) providing appropriate protected research time in job planning
  - d) developing and supporting business cases for joint clinical academic consultant posts with Universities
  - e) ensuring transparency with regards to research funding and resource allocation within their Trusts
  - f) supporting a positive culture, approach and attitude to research within the clinical and non-clinical/management teams
- Promoting their research activity with patients and the public

## **What can ophthalmologists do?**

The RCOphth encourages all ophthalmologists to consider participation in/contribution to clinical research as part of their core activity by:

- Seeking opportunities to be involved in and be engaged in research and research translation for example by partnering with academics (including clinical academics)
- Proactively developing their research skills eg through training opportunities and other resources
- Supporting colleagues and multidisciplinary teams in being research active
- Identifying research questions and projects which offer opportunity to improve clinical care
- Providing feedback to patients to enable increased participation and diversity in research
- Communicating research in a clear, 'jargon-free' manner to patients and the wider public
- Liaising with their College Regional Education Teams and their regional NIHR Ophthalmology CRN leads

More information on how to get started in research and other resources are available on the [RCOphth website](#).

## **What will RCOphth do to promote 'Ophthalmic Research by All' with external partners?**

The Academic Committee RCOphth will work with external health research facilitators - including NHSE, NIHR and other funders, CQC, GMC, HRA, Universities and other academic institutions, clinical research organisations - to ensure they promote and facilitate clinical research in the NHS and adequate provision of support, resources and protected time for ophthalmologists to be active in research through:

- Universities: Supporting the creation or continuation of joint clinical academic posts with universities in ophthalmology and ensuring that business cases for joint clinical academic posts are transparent and clear in terms of their value to trusts
- NIHR & other funders: Ensuring that funding opportunities and research priorities are aligned with their potential for improvements in clinical care and unmet need
- All: Ensuring systems/networks are in place to permit collaboration across departments, trusts, academic and industry to allow clinical research benefit from broad expertise and resources
- Promoting diversity and equality in patient participation in research

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