FINDING MY PEOPLE: MY EXPERIENCE AS AN EMERGENCY NURSE SCIENTIST IN A RESEARCH POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP AT AN ACADEMIC MEDICAL CENTER

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What Is a Research Postdoctoral Fellowship?

Postdoctoral fellowships are excellent opportunities for doctorally prepared nurses to further their research independence.1,2 Public agencies, such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation, the Veterans Health Administration, the Agency for Health Research and Quality, and the Health Resources and Services Administration offer postdoctoral fellowships to new researchers, including doctorally prepared nurses. Postdoctoral fellows are often supported through a Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award (NRSA), either through an F32 individual fellowship (for which the candidate submits a competitive grant application), or a T32 institutional mechanism, in which the sponsoring institution/university is awarded fellowship positions and hires trainees directly. NRSA fellows are supported for a period of 2 to 3 years.2 Private institutions, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trust also fund and offer postdoctoral opportunities—both for nurses and other interdisciplinary fellows. Although many emergency nurse scientists do not complete a postdoctoral fellowship, this was the path I chose to develop the necessary skills to become an independent nursing researcher. The purpose of this editorial is to share my personal journey as a postdoctoral fellow and describe how I grew from this experience.

The National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine has an ambitious goal to advance the health of all United States citizens by increasing the number of nurse scientists.3 A postdoctoral fellowship could facilitate the scholarly growth of nurses during their transition from graduate school to their next professional role: tenure-track faculty, industry researcher, consulting nurse scientist for hospitals, researcher within government agencies, instructor in nontraditional teaching environments, nonprofit leader, or public policy analyst.1,4,5 For the postdoctoral fellowship, I set my own developmental goals in leadership, multidisciplinary collaboration, community engagement, teaching experience, grant writing, scholarship, and research. My fellowship position was time intensive, but the transition was smoothed by having generous mentors, protected time for writing and research, and freedom from the immediate expectation to secure my own grant funding.

My Transition to a Postdoctoral Fellow

It was understood that completing a terminal degree meant that one was trained to conduct research and generate new knowledge.6 Although I was interested in serving in a nurse faculty position, I had always been a clinician up to this point in my career. Being a clinically engaged researcher had become one of my core values, which may not have always aligned with the expectations of tenure-track faculty positions in nursing.7 Reflecting on my work in the emergency department, I recognized that I was primarily focused on timeliness of care, emergency patient outcomes, and completion of ephemeral departmental tasks before the...
end of my shift. As a nursing researcher, I was called to address complex structural problems, such as health disparities and inequities in health outcomes.7

I had never heard of a postdoctoral fellowship until a mentor suggested it as a way to achieve many goals at once: publish the research from my dissertation, further my development as a researcher, expand my research networks, collaborate with scholars from other disciplines, and expand my teaching expertise. I applied for a postdoctoral fellowship in primary care research in an academic medical center. I was thrilled to be accepted in this postdoctoral fellowship but sad to take a 2-year leave from my ED position and nervous about how I would fit in as a nurse in an academic family medicine department.

Commitment to a Postdoctoral Position

As I eagerly transitioned from my role of graduate student to full-time research fellow, I would need to step away from my position as an emergency nurse and focus my energies on my newly assumed role, that of a postdoctoral fellow. Once in the fellowship, however, I soon found myself struggling with the universal problem: balancing multiple demands with limited time. As an emergency nurse, I could leave when my shift was completed, under most circumstances. In the postdoctoral fellowship, I was now surrounded by researchers, physicians, and other nonclinical support staff in a corporate-style environment. There were deadlines from department supervisors and collaborating mentors, and my own urgency to complete manuscripts and stay abreast of the literature—all while conducting my research. One of my mentors gleefully pointed out that the postdoctoral fellowship would be the last time in my career that I would be paid to think! There was little time left to disconnect completely from my research. I missed the easy comradery of emergency nursing.

I was 1 of 2 nurses in this fellowship cohort. An advantage of a fellowship at an academic medical center was receiving interdisciplinary support. Having a sounding board for my ideas enhanced the rigor of my scholarship, sharpened my research focus, and broadened my perspective on how to achieve an equitable health care system. Postdocs were quick to bond with each other in this stimulating environment, a phenomenon that reminded me of the easy collegiality that arose from the fast-paced and unpredictable nature of an emergency department. In interdisciplinary fellowships, nurse scientists have opportunities to engage in collaborative research endeavors that address the social and structural determinants of health.8

Postdoctoral Activities and How They Prepare You for Independent Research

My postdoctoral fellowship activities included conference presentations, seminars, manuscript preparation, grant writing, teaching, and refinement of my program of research. My program of research is to advance the health of immigrant populations through public policy advocacy and to increase health-promoting behaviors through leveraging community resources. During my 2 years in the fellowship, I disseminated research findings at local and regional nursing conferences and international medical conferences. A highlight was presenting at the Saunders-Watkins Leadership Workshop at NIH in Washington, DC. At the workshop, I was surrounded by some of the brightest researchers in the nation. After hearing high-level scientists describe the evolution of their careers, I was inspired to publish.

When I embarked on my fellowship, one of my goals was that I would develop my skills as a writer and publish the findings from my dissertation research.9,10 The fellowship allowed time for reflection, which provided the impetus I needed to write manuscripts for submission to peer-reviewed journals (it also provided a safe space to weather manuscript rejection).10 When I received immediate “desk rejections” by editors, as well as rejections by reviewers who critiqued my work with enthusiasm and then rejected it, I viewed these as new opportunities to find the proper journal fit. I took each critique to heart and strengthened my manuscript. During the postdoctoral fellowship, I eventually was invited to serve as a journal reviewer for The Journal of Emergency Nursing. Here, I could draw on my clinical experience to evaluate emergency nursing research that could contribute valuable insights to nursing science, as well as see the publishing process from another perspective.

Integrating Health Equity Into a Postdoctoral Fellowship

As an emergency nurse in a critical access medical center, I had long recognized that an inadequate access to health promotion education often led to an increased risk for preventable chronic illnesses. Health education could potentially diminish dependence on emergency departments for primary care, enabling them to respond more effectively to crises from emerging threats, such as the coronavirus or bioterrorism. One of my community partners was a pastor of a predominately Spanish-speaking congregation in a limited resource community. After I presented my dissertation findings to the congregation, he shared his concerns about the increasing incidence of obesity in his
congregation. I assembled a research team that included the pastor to design a health curriculum for children and adolescents that could be embedded into their current religious education classes. We applied for and were awarded funding from the local chapter of an international nursing organization to move this community-based, participatory research project forward and are currently working with our third cohort of students. Through this collaboration, I came to better understand this community’s needs and the impact of their environment on health outcomes.

Through grand round and community presentations, postdocs analyzed complex issues, such as structural racism and housing inequality. Critical discussions with senior researchers were also available to serve as mentors for the postdocs. Researchers and other postdocs raised my awareness of how viewing a problem through the lens of another discipline could strengthen nursing research.8,11 Frequently, our discussions would center on how we could apply our leadership skills in research or practice in our respective communities. Senior researchers were also available to serve as mentors for the postdocs.

Mentors Serve Many Roles

There is considerable evidence that success in a graduate program, as well as in a postdoctoral position, can be fostered through positive relationships with mentors.3,12 In the fast-paced environment of the emergency department, I depended on experienced emergency nurses as mentors. My mentors in graduate school were emergency nursing colleagues, other doctoral students, and PhD committee members who provided support, not only as a doctoral student, but as I advanced my career.3,13 Mentors can show you how to apply for funding to keep a research program on track and moving forward.7 Mentors also expand professional networks by introducing young nursing scientists to others outside of nursing for collaborative research opportunities.7

The Outcomes of a Postdoctoral Fellowship

The goals of a postdoctoral fellowship were to produce a deliverable that could be leveraged to attain a tenure-track position, develop leadership skills, and grow your research networks.3,13 The deliverable could be negotiated, either as a published manuscript, a funded research proposal, or a mentored scholarship opportunity. The fellowship strategically positioned one for a future career through increased professional networks, additional training in statistics, and classes on how to apply for an NIH grant. We also engaged in initial phases of our career trajectory mapping.14 This approach to career decisions was enlightening to me as I imagined my future unfolding through incremental and intentional steps. As I contemplated my evolving career trajectory, my mind returned to the advice of another mentor who said, “You are your own CEO.” I have discovered there is a caveat to that freedom, though. It takes imagination to have a worthy goal and persistence to reach it.15,16

What Is a T32 Center and How Can You Find It for Your Own Postdoctoral Research Opportunity?

The T32 is an institutional research training grant under the Ruth L. Kirschstein NRSA and is available for biomedical and behavioral science programs, as well as schools of nursing. Some currently funded nursing institutions with T32 grant funding are the University of Pennsylvania, Case Western Reserve, University of Utah, and Ohio State, among others. T32-funded nursing centers typically have multiple foci, with research on symptom science, improving outcomes of chronic conditions, and self- and family management. Emergency nursing is in an ideal position to collaborate with other disciplines (medicine, psychology, and social work) to improve patient outcomes. The essential work of triage in emergency nursing is currently being investigated by Dr Stephanie Frisch at the University of Pittsburgh through the use of another NIH-sponsored training mechanism (an F31 training grant). Dr Frisch is using big data in the development of emergency nursing triage tools that could quickly identify acute coronary syndrome and potentially reduce patient mortality through rapid identification. Other nursing T32 centers, as well as funding opportunities, can be located on the National Institute of Nursing Research website (https://www.ninr.nih.gov/researchandfunding/desp). The National Institute of Nursing Research is a proponent of interdisciplinary nursing research and encourages incorporating biological and behavioral sciences, as well as genomic research, to better inform nursing research questions. I highly recommend T32 postdoctoral fellowships for nascent nursing scholars. They provide an environment that stimulates intellectual growth, allows for interdisciplinary collaboration, and sets you on path toward independence.

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REFERENCES


