

My career story



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16 years in clinical trial management

Tell us your story...

I graduated with a degree in Pharmacology in 2000 and worked in preclinical research in the field of respiratory and inflammation. I realised the pre-clinical side of research was not for me and after 3 years, I returned to academia to do a clinical based PhD in pharmaceuticals and bio-imaging. This introduced me to clinical trials and what was involved and I really enjoyed it.

In 2007, I started in Edinburgh Clinical Trials Unit (ECTU) in its infancy as a Trial Manager. I was part of a small team that set up the trials unit along-side managing a port-folio of trials in cardiology and musculoskeletal conditions (both UK and international trials).

Baby number 1 arrived in 2010 and I returned to my role part time (3 days) in 2011 and then had baby number 2 in 2013. My diversity of my role in my 7 years in ECTU, meant I was involved in every aspect of setting up and delivering clinical trials as well as being involved in setting up a UK accredited trials unit. I had a great supportive management team (so important!) and I would class this as the main learning phase of my career.

After baby number two, I changed academic institution to Glasgow Caledonian University in 2014. Main reason for this was 2-fold; a better work /life balance – a 15 minute commute each way, versus a 1.5hr commute each way and I needed a new challenge. This was not a promotion in title but was a “pay grade” higher than my previous role. This started my personal development and “say yes” stage of my career. I was employed to work on one large (non-drug) NIHR trial and this was not in a trials unit. My experience allowed me to bring in mentorship and processes to the existing staff working on trials.

Again, I had a hugely supportive management team who allowed me to continue to challenge and push myself forward to take on additional roles; executive member of UKTMN; executive member of an ethics committee; setting up a PPI group; collaborating in trials methodology projects.

What do you think were the key milestones that got you to your current trial management role?

I have always had hugely supportive and inspiring line management. People that allow me to try new things, push boundaries and get involved with things outside the projects I am contracted to work on. I am not core-funded so, sometimes this can be tricky depending on work-load on the projects but I had the drive and they supported that!

One key milestone as a trial manager was being heavily involved in the data management and database design in my early stages. This knowledge has been instrumental when asked to be involved in assessing study logistics, how data is collected and what the implications are in the daily trial operational phase.

Every aspect of my volunteer roles impacts positively on my trial management skills – being involved in an ethics committee, the UKTMN, the Trials Methodology Research Partnership group for example. Working on a long trial can limit your learning experiences, having other opportunities to learn and hear from others is so important.

What top three key skills do you think have been key to your development as a clinical trials' management professional?

- Being proactive as well as reactive.
- Highly organised and excellent communication and personal skills.
- Being able to prioritise – and know that the weekly “to do” list can change very quickly.

What has been the main challenge that you have encountered on your professional development journey in clinical trial management? Are you able to share any tips to help others circumnavigate this challenge?

Promotion /progression has been my main challenge. Despite year on year my responsibilities increasing, the academic promotion process has currently meant I am at a “glass ceiling” and I am currently unable to progress currently. Academic excellence criteria for promotion in my current institution is based on publications (first author) and evidence of bringing in research funding. Being trial manager means the main focus is on delivering the project, these criteria are extremely difficult to achieve, despite showing excellence in all other promotional criteria.

I am still on the same pay scale as I was employed on 9 years ago and my title; senior trial manager was agreed with my line managers as they realised my title should reflect the work and responsibilities I have but this was not a formal promotion (or pay increase).

I have recently challenged and had some open discussions about the current promotion pathway with various individuals in my current employment and discussions are starting to happen. My advice here would be do not think that one voice will not be heard or have any impact. Speak up and see what happens!

I have been allowed to develop many additional skills in this recent phase of my career. I still manage trials but I am slowly taking a side step into many different avenues. Despite the current lack of promotion success, I have had positives. I was recently selected to do a research leadership program within my institution focussing on media and policy making and I have just become lead of the PPI group. The time/funding to do these extra activities is still a major problem and again one I do not fully have the answer to right now. In my ideal world, academic institutions would allow some funded time to allow trial managers to progress and develop. Sounds simple but not as easy to put into place. I do believe that positive changes are happening and hopefully in the next year or so, I will have had my expertise and skillsets more formally recognised – watch this space!