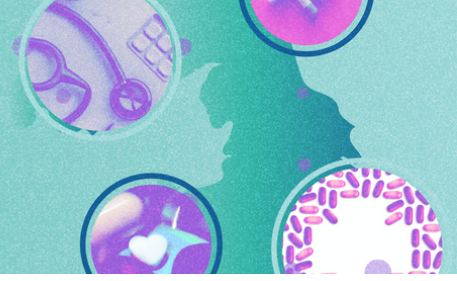


My career story



Riti Desai

Ophthalmology Research Manager
King's College Hospital, London
14 years in clinical trial management

Tell us your story...

My journey within clinical trial management stemmed from a previous career in research and academia.

After earning my Master's & M Phil. degree in Mumbai, India in 1991, I became a lecturer at one of the leading universities in Mumbai. I soon progressed to Senior Lecturer and then Head of Department, representing the University on various committees and working groups. I was involved in curriculum setting, board of studies and the examination, assessments, and grants committees. Here I also developed a passion for undertaking and supervising academic research projects.

In 2005, I migrated to the UK and worked in various academic roles in different cities. This is when I became interested in clinical trial management and realised that the managerial skillset and research-driven mindset I had developed would be a great match.

In 2009, I moved to London and began my career in clinical research as a Research Facilitator at King's College Hospital. I managed and facilitated trials across different phases and designs, working very closely with clinicians and research fellows as well as trial monitors, sponsors, R&D departments, and external stakeholders; as well as improving my understanding of the differences between non-commercial and commercial research within the NHS.

In 2010, I was appointed as Clinical Trial Manager in Ophthalmology for a multicentre, pivotal, randomised controlled trial. I then progressed on to Senior Trial Manager roles and to my current position as Clinical Research Manager for the King's Ophthalmology Research Unit (KORU).

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

Since starting my trial management journey in 2009, I have continued to challenge myself and take opportunities to learn new skills as well as better understand the multi-faceted aspects of the industry.

Initially, being a Research Facilitator helped me gain a good understanding of clinical trials in the NHS, including regulatory and medical affairs, good clinical practice, and the NHS Research governance framework. After this, I joined as a dedicated Trial Manager for one of the largest investigator-initiated ophthalmology trials in the UK. This came with a lot of challenges and learning opportunities. I established strong links with research staff across various sites and delivered the trial successfully to time and target. My efforts in the successful delivery of this complex trial were recognised.

Soon I became more involved in other studies, right from grant applications, database development, analysis and writing up results. My role expanded substantially, and I was taking on additional responsibilities, having a more strategic overview of clinical trial management. I acquired PRINCE 2 Project Management qualifications and attended several professional development courses and symposiums on GCP compliance, essentials of NHS research, regulatory inspections, archiving, trial monitoring, patient recruitment, and project management.

My responsibilities continued to grow, I now provide strategic, professional, and operational leadership to the KORU research team. I have significantly expanded our portfolio of studies as well as expanded the team to more than double the headcount. Alongside this, I am the co-manager of a larger combined Research Delivery unit within the trust to provide operational oversight. I also undertook a secondment as a Lead Research Governance Facilitator within the Trust's Research and Development department and helped facilitate studies across different specialities at three other hospital sites.

My strong work ethic, resilience, and determination to deliver results has helped me in progressing within the clinical trial management space and thoroughly enjoying what I do day to day.

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

- Excellent communication and networking.
- Being meticulous and highly organised.
- Managing within a resource constrained environment.

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?

Working within the NHS comes with its own set of challenges. Staff turnover, resource shortfalls and funding constraints are common which can make managing budgets and short-term funded projects challenging. Currently, there is a lack of a distinct pathway for research staff and trial managers within the NHS, which imminently needs to be addressed. Initial appointments are often short or fixed term, funded via grant or research funding and the length of the trial management roles is not always clear. The disparity between job titles, responsibilities and salary banding within different organisations or even different departments of the same hospital can be significant. Addressing these issues and increasing the recognition of clinical trial managers is vital to increase retention for the profession in the UK.

In my case, as my role expanded beyond managing multiple trials, to be primarily responsible for overseeing and managing the delivery and implementation of a wide and varied ophthalmology research portfolio; the disparity between my salary banding and responsibilities became greatly exaggerated.

I expressed this to the Lead Clinician and R&D Director and requested an upbanding. With their support, I put together a business plan to restructure our unit into a more sustainable organisational structure including additional hires. Once approved, staff were placed in bands appropriate to their training, experience, roles, and responsibilities - which has improved team morale.

My suggestion for others starting their trial management journey would be to:

- Have early conversations with line manager or Trust R&D in defining the role and clarifying responsibilities.
- Network with other Trial managers within the organisation and form a body who can represent concerns to higher management.