

The importance of diabetes research



Iain Frame

Research is at the heart of Diabetes UK. At any given time, hundreds of researchers funded by us are engaged in projects, working towards a future without diabetes and its complications. Nurses, who work tirelessly to improve the lives of those living with diabetes, are also at the heart of our charity. In fact, their support is essential for most of our activities in raising awareness, providing care services and education, running care events and training, and providing information and guidance, as we build up a more detailed picture of diabetes in the UK.

Despite their vital role, it is rare for us to see nurses leading their own diabetes research projects. In fact, over the last 3 years we have not received a single research application with a nurse as the principal applicant. We really want that to change. Nurses have an intimate insight into the day-to-day experiences of people with diabetes. They see how the condition affects a person's overall health and wellbeing, as well as the lives of their loved ones. We know that there are nurses with great ideas for research projects and a commitment to improving the lives of the people they treat.

That is why we have recently set up a new fellowship to encourage and support NHS employees to work towards a PhD or MD and develop a career in diabetes-related research. The Sir George Alberti Research Training Fellowship is open to both clinicians and non-clinically trained applicants and offers support for a period of up to 3 years. It is an ideal way for novices to get the training they need to embark on a future in research.

The services that nurses deliver to people with diabetes have been shaped – and greatly improved – through rigorous, innovative research. Diabetes UK is proud to support a range of different research projects, with a particular focus on type 1 and type 2 diabetes, and diabetes complications. Every day, nurses witness the impact of this work on the people they treat and the methods they use to treat them.

For example, in 2000, Diabetes UK funded research to develop Dose Adjustment For Normal Eating (DAFNE), a 5-day course that teaches adults with type 1 diabetes to estimate the amount of carbohydrate in each meal and to inject the correct dose of insulin. DAFNE helped to improve participants' blood-glucose control and quality of life and, since then, DAFNE courses have become a routine part of type 1 diabetes management and are now offered in 141 localities throughout the UK and Ireland.

In 2011, we funded a groundbreaking trial that aimed to find out if a strict, very-low-calorie diet could provide an alternative to weight-loss surgery for the treatment of type 2 diabetes. Under close medical supervision, 11 people with type 2 diabetes were put on a strict diet of 600 calories per day, consisting of only diet drinks and non-starchy vegetables. After 2 months, type 2 diabetes was reversed in all participants and, 3 months later, seven of the participants remained free of the condition. We are now planning a follow-up study to determine if these diets can be maintained in the long term within routine NHS care.

Despite the recent fall in the number of fellowship applications we receive, the need for good research like this remains. We want to continue to fund the best research candidates, regardless of background, and that is why we merged several of our support schemes to create the new Alberti Fellowship.

The fellowship builds on the strengths of our existing research portfolio and recognises the pioneering research career of Sir George Alberti, our current Chair. His "hands-on" approach to the training of researchers from different backgrounds and his instrumental position in shaping healthcare policy make him the perfect inspiration for NHS staff wanting to expand into research.

We are accepting applications until 31 October 2012. A CV and publication list for applicants, as well as a CV for a proposed supervisor, should be sent to research@diabetes.org.uk. ■

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