

National Council for the Professional Development of  
Nursing and Midwifery

Nursing and Midwifery  
**Research Priorities**  
for Ireland

REPORT SUMMARY



*National Council for the*  
**Professional Development**  
*of Nursing and Midwifery*

*An Chomhairle Náisiúnta d'Fhorbairt*  
*Ghairmiúil an Altranais agus*  
*an Chnáimhseachais*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study has been conducted in order to identify research priorities for nursing and midwifery in Ireland. It represents an important step in the advancement of health services in Ireland and builds on the notable developments in nursing and midwifery in the country over recent years. Research-based practice is a key factor in providing high quality, cost-effective and efficient health services. It is imperative, in moving towards meeting the health strategy requirement of transparent and evidence-based decision making, that the nursing and midwifery professions demonstrate the scientific evidence upon which their practice is based. Setting research priorities is central to the development of evidence-based practice.

### Policy Background

From the Research Strategy for Nursing and Midwifery in Ireland: Final Report the primary recommendation was that work should be undertaken at an early date to identify and prioritise the most important nursing and midwifery issues – in the areas of clinical practice, management and education – consistent with the wider healthcare agenda, which require a research base. Accordingly in 2004 the Department of Health and Children requested the National Council for the Professional Development of Nursing and Midwifery (National Council) to initiate a study to identify nursing and midwifery research priorities for Ireland. The study was subsequently commissioned by the National Council through the Health Research Board under the following terms of reference:

- To review the relevant national and international literature regarding research priorities for nursing and midwifery and set this in the context of research and development for health in Ireland.
- Using a robust methodology, to ascertain the research priorities and subsequent ranking for Irish nursing and midwifery from key stakeholders representing the totality of nursing and midwifery in Ireland.
- To provide an interim and final report, the latter of which should clearly identify short-term, medium-term and long-term priorities for nursing and midwifery research, including clinical, managerial and educational issues.

The research was conducted by a team from the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Studies, University College Dublin, led by Dr Therese Meehan.

### Literature

The team of researchers engaged in this study had available a considerable body of professional literature, mostly from international sources, on the concept of research priorities. This literature was reviewed comprehensively and was used as a guiding context for the study. It confirmed firstly the crucial importance of setting research priorities. Given the many and diverse health-related research topics that could be addressed, choices must be made. Available funding must be allocated to topics that have the highest potential impact on healthcare outcomes. Hence most developed countries have set national priorities for healthcare research that are directly linked to their particular healthcare needs.

The literature revealed secondly that 'value of research' is a central concept in considering approaches to setting research priorities. The 'value of research' approach suggests that priority topics must be specifically focused on health system burdens and needs and that stakeholders within the health system should be consulted in any priority setting exercise. It is of note that in the most influential studies reviewed the priorities identified have been linked carefully to national healthcare priorities.

The literature revealed finally that by far the most common approach to setting research priorities for nursing and midwifery is the Delphi survey of nurses' or midwives' views of what they think are the most important and most urgent problems that need to be addressed through research. This approach has been used widely for local, regional and national studies and for research by specialist practice groups because it is a relatively straightforward and effective method of making group decisions and is both time-effective and cost-effective.

## Method

It was therefore decided that the methodology for this study of research priorities for nursing and midwifery in Ireland would encompass a three-round, decision Delphi survey to identify and rate the importance of clinical, managerial and educational research issues, followed by a one-day discussion group workshop to identify timeframes within which research on the issues should be conducted. It was decided that this design would best allow for a national representative sample of informed nurses and midwives to reach majority consensus on research priorities within the designated time period and budget. In order to obtain the views of service users on nursing and midwifery research priorities, a small number of service users were included at the discussion group workshop stage of the study. The study was conducted over a nine-month period, from May 2004 through January 2005.

The basic Delphi survey comprises a series of paper and pencil questionnaires. On the round 1 questionnaire, convenience samples of 780 nurses and 142 midwives contributed over 5,000 statements of clinical, managerial and educational issues requiring research. The samples were demographically representative of nurses and midwives in professional employment in Ireland who were also knowledgeable about research; almost 80 per cent had completed a research module and 50 per cent had completed a research dissertation. In the analyses twenty-four nursing and twenty-six midwifery research issues were identified, each defined by specific examples. High response rates were achieved for the round 2 and round 3 questionnaires on which nurses and midwives rated the importance of their respective research issues using a 7-point importance rating scale. At a subsequent discussion workshop, participants rated the issues in relation to timeframes and in the light of the national health strategy and the health service reform programme.

Of the twenty-four priority issues for nursing research identified in the survey, five were rated high priority for research in the short term: three clinical issues, 'outcomes of care delivery', 'staffing issues in practice' and 'communication in clinical practice'; and two managerial issues, 'recruitment and retention of nurses' and 'nursing input into health policy and decision making'. Similarly, of the twenty-six priority issues for midwifery research identified in the survey, six were rated high priority for research in the short term: three clinical issues, 'satisfaction with care', 'care in labour' and 'preparation for practice'; one managerial issue, 'promoting woman-centred care'; and two educational issues, 'promoting the distinctiveness of midwifery' and 'promoting research/research-based practice'.

The tables on the next page are taken from the main report and show more detail.

## Priorities Identified

The research priorities identified for nursing and midwifery in Ireland reflect the priorities identified in other European countries and in North America. They suggest research programmes that target the health service concerns identified in the national health agenda, such as the need to identify protocols and procedures that improve patient and client care outcomes and to examine and test solutions to workforce problems.

The findings of this study provide a firm basis for the development of nursing and midwifery research programmes that can further strengthen the professions' ability to extend health-related knowledge and help address important national healthcare problems and needs which are in urgent need of solutions.

# CONCLUSIONS

## Nursing Research Priorities

This table summarises the clinical, managerial and educational research priorities for nursing and presents them in relation to their priority-level rank order, level of sample consensus on importance ratings on round 3, mean importance ratings (used to determine rank order), SDs as indicators of the variability of importance ratings and the timeframe within which research on each of the priorities should be conducted. Five nursing issues met all the criteria for being considered high priority for research: three clinical issues, *outcomes of care delivery*, *staffing issues in practice* and *communication in clinical practice*; and two managerial issues, *recruitment and retention of nurses* and *nursing input into health policy and decision making*. The highest priority clinical issue for research was *outcomes of care delivery*, the highest priority managerial issue for research was *recruitment and retention of nurses* and the highest priority educational issue was *research and evidence-based practice*. However, the educational issue did not meet the criteria for being considered high priority because consensus on the importance rating of this issue did not reach 80 per cent.

Taking all the nursing issues together, the highest priority issue requiring research in the short term was the clinical issue of *outcomes of care delivery* (M=6.27). The second highest issue overall requiring research in the short term was the managerial issue of *recruitment and retention of nurses* (M=6.26). The third and fourth highest priority issues, respectively, requiring research in the short term were the clinical issues of *staffing issues in practice* (M=6.25) and *communication in clinical practice* (M=6.24). The fifth highest priority issue overall requiring research in the short term was the managerial issue of *nursing input into health policy and decision-making* (M=6.17). None of the educational issues met all the criteria for being included in the highest priority grouping.

Seven of the ten clinical priority issues were identified as requiring research in the short term. All the managerial priority issues were identified as requiring research in the short term. Only one of the nine educational priority issues was identified as requiring research in the short term. Some research issues showed a mean importance rating of greater than 6.0 on the 7-point scale, but they were not included in the highest priority grouping because the consensus of their mean importance ratings was less than 80 per cent.

Table 4.14: Nursing clinical, managerial and educational research priorities by rank, consensus, mean importance rating and timeframe

Issue/Example	Rank <sup>1</sup>	Consensus <sup>2</sup> (%)	Mean (SD)	Timeframe
<b>Clinical</b>				
*Outcomes of care delivery	1	85.7%	6.27 (0.92)	Short
*Staffing issues in practice	2	83.4%	6.25 (0.95)	Short
*Communication in clinical practice	3	84.3%	6.24 (0.95)	Short
Quality assurance in practice	4	77.0%	5.99 (0.88)	Short
Nursing practice roles	5	72.2%	5.90 (0.99)	Short
Psychological care concerns	6	69.9%	5.83 (0.99)	Short
Ethical concerns	7	67.2%	5.82 (1.02)	Short
Specialist and advanced practice roles	8	69.1%	5.80 (1.05)	Medium-long
Physical care concerns	9	70.2%	5.79 (1.24)	Medium-long
Nurses' attitudes to specific patient/client groups	10	57.0%	5.48 (1.30)	Medium-long
<b>Management</b>				
*Recruitment and retention of nurses	1	82.0%	6.26 (0.93)	Short
*Nursing input into health policy and decision making	2	80.0%	6.17 (0.94)	Short
Role of nurse managers	3	78.3%	6.03 (0.99)	Short
Health and safety in practice	4	70.5%	5.95 (1.06)	Short
Quality assurance and standards of care	5	69.1%	5.86 (0.90)	Short
<b>Education</b>				
Research and evidence-based practice	1	78.0%	6.08 (0.88)	Short
Career planning and professional/ educational development	2	77.0%	6.01 (0.97)	Medium-long
Outcomes and effectiveness of education	3	75.3%	5.98 (0.93)	Medium-long
Undergraduate/pre-registration clinical learning	4	70.6%	5.92 (1.05)	Medium-long
Clinical education links between service and academic organisations	5	68.0%	5.86 (1.00)	Medium-long
Educational needs analysis	6	69.1%	5.81 (1.01)	Medium-long
Professional appraisal and staff development	7	68.9%	5.81 (1.05)	Medium-long
Models of course delivery	8	60.7%		Medium-long
Recruitment and retention related to nurse education	9	62.0%	5.64 (1.13)	Medium-long

<sup>1</sup>Research priorities are ranked within category <sup>2</sup>Percentage rating the issues as a high priority (6.0 or above on a 7-point scale)

\*High priority for research in the short term

## Midwifery Research Priorities

This table summarises the clinical, managerial and educational research priorities for midwifery and presents them in relation to their priority-level rank order, level of sample consensus on importance ratings on round 3, mean importance ratings (used to determine rank order), SDs as indicators of the variability of importance ratings, as well as the timeframe within which research on each of the priorities should be conducted. Six midwifery issues met all the criteria for being considered high priority for research: three clinical issues, *satisfaction with care*, *care in labour* and *preparation for practice*; one managerial issue, *promoting woman-centred care*; and two educational issues, *promoting the distinctiveness of midwifery* and *promoting research/research-based practice*. The highest priority clinical issue for research was *satisfaction with care*, the highest priority managerial issue for research was *promoting woman-centred care*, and the highest priority educational issue for research was *promoting the distinctiveness of midwifery*.

Taking all of the midwifery issues together, the highest priority issue requiring research in the short term, was the managerial issue of *promoting woman-centred care* (M=6.47). The second highest issue overall requiring research in the short term was the educational issue of *promoting the distinctiveness of midwifery* (M=6.33), followed closely in third ranking by the clinical issue of *satisfaction with care* (M=6.33). The fourth and fifth highest issues respectively requiring research in the short term were the clinical issues of *care in labour* (M=6.26) and *preparation for practice* (M=6.25). The sixth highest issue overall requiring research in the short term was the educational issue of *promoting research/research-based practice* (M=6.21).

Eight of eleven clinical priority issues were identified as requiring research in the short term. Four of the eight managerial priority issues were identified as requiring research in the short term, and four of the seven educational priority issues were identified as requiring research in the short term. Some research issues showed a mean importance rating of greater than 6.0 on the 7-point scale, but they were not included in the highest priority grouping because the consensus of their mean importance ratings was less than 80 per cent.

Table 4.21: Midwifery clinical, managerial and educational research priorities by rank, consensus, mean importance rating and timeframe

Issue/Example	Rank	Consensus (%)	Mean (SD)	Timeframe
<b>Clinical</b>				
*Satisfaction with care	1	81.6%	6.33 (0.78)	Short
*Care in labour	2	86.7%	6.26 (1.15)	Short
*Preparation for practice	3	80.6%	6.25 (1.04)	Short
Communication	4	82.7%	6.23 (1.13)	Medium-long
Models of care	5	77.6%	6.20 (0.93)	Short
Clinical supervision	6	78.6%	6.17 (0.90)	Short
Continuing professional education	7	78.6%	5.98 (1.09)	Short
Breastfeeding	8	72.4%	5.87 (1.37)	Medium-long
Health promotion	9	66.3%	5.83 (1.01)	Short
Human resource management	10	63.3%	5.74 (1.35)	Short
Management grades	11	26.5%	4.61 (1.56)	Medium-long
<b>Management</b>				
*Promoting woman-centred care	1	88.8%	6.47 (0.70)	Short
Sources of stress	2	78.6%	6.13 (1.16)	Short
Developing midwifery practice	3	76.5%	6.09 (1.06)	Medium-long
Workforce planning	4	71.4%	5.91 (1.21)	Medium-long
Barriers to autonomy	5	70.4%	5.87 (1.09)	Short
Management culture	6	63.3%	5.61 (1.24)	Short
Change management	7	61.2%	5.58 (1.24)	Medium-long
Levels of management	8	44.9%	5.25 (1.31)	Medium-long
<b>Education</b>				
*Promoting the distinctiveness of midwifery	1	85.7%	6.33 (0.66)	Short
Continuing education	2	81.6%	6.23 (0.77)	Medium-long
*Promoting research/research-based practice	3	83.7%	6.21 (0.88)	Short
Student learning/education	4	82.7%	6.17 (0.95)	Medium-long
Support for midwives working with students	5	77.6%	6.11 (1.07)	Short
Midwifery curriculum	6	66.3%	5.79 (1.03)	Medium-long
Role of the midwife tutor	7	62.2%	5.62 (1.25)	Short

\*High priority for research in the short term



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