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Getting started in research: How anaesthesia research co-ordinators can help

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Purpose of document:

This document outlines the instrumental role of research co-ordinators in supporting high-quality anaesthesia research across Australia and New Zealand. It introduces the Anaesthesia Research Co-ordinators Network (ARCN) and its initiatives under the ANZCA Clinical Trials Network (CTN), aiming to promote a collaborative research culture and build research capacity. It also encourages departments and investigators to engage with experienced co-ordinators to drive meaningful, evidence-based research initiatives.

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The development of the Anaesthesia Research Coordinator Network (ARCN) and ANZCA CTN toolkit is being led by the CTN office team, in collaboration with the ARCN sub-committee and the CTN executive. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the ANZCA CTN members, CTN office, ARCN sub-committee, and CTN executive in the creation, preparation, development, and review of this document.

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Getting started in research: How anaesthesia research co-ordinators can help

Great research is essential for the development of high-quality, evidence-based healthcare. There are many hurdles to implementing meaningful research, such as lack of research experience, skills, ability, and capacity. The ANZCA Clinical Trials Network (CTN) believes that research co-ordinators play an integral role, not only in implementing a high-quality research program (including multicentre trials), but also in facilitating the development of an organisational research culture that is collaborative, inclusive, and supportive.

With this in mind, the ANZCA CTN executive formalised the Anaesthesia Research Co-ordinators Network (ARCN) sub-committee in 2016 to represent more than 180 research co-ordinators facilitating anaesthesia research across New Zealand and Australia.

1. The evolving role of research co-ordinators

Research co-ordinators are instrumental to the success of research departments. They provide the knowledge and expertise to perform critical roles in research and clinical trials, including:

- Preparation of ethics and governance submissions and reports.
- Co-ordinating studies in accordance with [International Council for Harmonisation \(ICH\) Good Clinical Practice \(GCP\)](#) guidelines and the [Therapeutic Goods Administration \(TGA\)](#) in Australia and [Medsafe](#) in New Zealand.
- Recruiting, consenting, and supporting patients and families.
- Liaising with hospital colleagues and other hospital departments about studies.
- Collecting data and managing Case Report Forms (CRFs).
- Communicating with a range of other specialties including surgical teams, General Practitioners (GPs), district nursing, and health services.
- Presenting at and facilitating research meetings and promoting staff development and satisfaction.
- Supporting the development of research protocols and study procedures.
- Troubleshooting trial management operations.
- Grant writing assistance.
- Education and implementation of research outcomes within departments.
- Education and upskilling of junior members of the department in research practices.
- Educating other hospital departments on trials that are currently being conducted.
- Liaising with consumer representatives/lived experience experts.

2. ARCN initiatives and support

The ARCN continues to expand its support for research co-ordinators through various initiatives:

- Annual ARCN networking event during the CTN strategic research workshop.
- Mentoring program for regional or speciality-specific guidance.
- Educational sessions through the CTN.
- CTN Toolkit and [ANZCA Research Support Toolkit](#) as part of a college-wide initiative.
- ARCN support chat group for instant advice and support.

3. Engaging in research

ANZCA fellows and trainees may face a daunting experience when considering whether to participate in a multicentre trial or undertake their own research project. However, this is achievable and rewarding when supported by experienced research co-ordinators.

One of the priorities for the ARCN is to promote a research culture across departments and organisations. The goal is to build a sustainable network and work with anaesthetists at all levels, whether for student projects, audits, observational studies, scholar role activities, or investigator-led research.

Research co-ordinators are passionate and qualified professionals, often with nursing, allied health and research backgrounds, who are ready to help departments succeed in research.

4. Getting started

The CTN is collaborating with departments to find ways to employ or utilise research co-ordinators. A recent survey conducted by the CTN office revealed that more than half of the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) of research co-ordinators depends on competitive funding. The CTN has developed a business case to justify employment through various avenues of funding support as well as per-patient trial payments. Some departments also secure direct hospital funding to employ research co-ordinators. (Contact the CTN office for a copy of the business case ctn@anzca.edu.au)

For those just starting, the CTN facilitates buddying and mentoring with experienced co-ordinators and may provide Intensive Care Unit (ICU) research staff support.

5. Goals of the new anaesthesia research co-ordinator in the first 12 months

In the first 12 months, the anaesthesia research co-ordinator is encouraged to:

- Participate in onboarding and upskilling at the hospital.
- Link in with the CTN office to be included on mailing lists for newsletters and communiques and added to group networking chats.
- Undertake training in ICH GCP.
- Recruit and follow-up sufficient patients to meet funding criteria expectations.
- Participate in new collaborative research as presented.
- Attend the Annual ANZCA CTN Workshop funded by their department. This is an important event to network with peers and upskill in clinical trial delivery and troubleshooting.
- Participate in locally initiated departmental research and quality assurance projects.
- Engage with clinical trial co-ordinators in other specialties to facilitate collaborative research efforts.
- Explore inhouse training opportunities (forums, grand rounds, departmental meetings, research week).
- Shadow co-ordinators from other departments and hospitals to be exposed to a variety of processes.
- Consider the CTN mentoring program.
- Attend regional networking events hosted by the representative of the ARCN sub-committee.

6. Barriers and enablers to the ANZCA CTN research co-ordinator role

The BEAR Study (Barriers and Enablers to the Anaesthesia Research co-ordinator role) explored the experiences of both new and experienced research co-ordinators within the ANZCA CTN. It identified several key barriers that affect the role's efficiency and sustainability. New co-ordinators often face feelings of isolation, unpaid overtime, lack of structured handovers or supervised training, and even practical issues such as a lack of desks or computers when starting. They also reported restrictions in recruitment due to lack of cover and limited support. Experienced co-ordinators, while more embedded in the system, still encountered significant challenges including being peripheral to the outside hospital operations, being deprioritised compared to other specialties, time inefficiencies from lack of integration with normal clinical processes (e.g. waiting for screening/recruitment), communication breakdowns, unpredictable workloads, and logistical barriers such as changes to theatre lists or surgeon co-ordination.

The study also identified numerous enablers that support research co-ordinators to succeed in their role. These include structured resources (e.g. standardised site files, checklists, ethics/governance guidelines), mentorship, support from trial managers and other hospitals, and integration into supportive professional communities like the ARCN. New research co-ordinators particularly benefit from "Anaesthesia 101" or "Theatre 101" sessions, shadowing experienced

peers, and good relationships with anaesthetics departments. For experienced research co-ordinators, key enablers included efficient trial-specific tools, team co-ordination, prioritisation, administrative support, and engaged principal investigators were essential. Humorous but tellingly, “chocolate to incentivise wards” was also listed as a practical enabler across the board. Overall, the study highlighted the importance of mentorship, practical support, and system-level integration to help research co-ordinators thrive.

7. Pathways to satisfaction, retention and success

The role of the research co-ordinator can be both a challenging and rewarding career. A survey conducted by Roberts *et al* 2011, found that critical care research co-ordinators have high levels of satisfaction with general conditions and aspects of their work and environment and are passionate about their role in the ICU (closest comparator to anaesthesia research); with a quarter studying towards a Masters or PhD. However, this same group reported dissatisfaction with lack of support, career advancement opportunities, funding, job security, and professional recognition.

In light of these results, supporting research co-ordinators in their career development is important for job satisfaction and retention. Unrealistic expectations should not be placed on the research co-ordinator, and they should be provided with career development opportunities, for example, attending the CTN annual workshop and study days. If there is more than one research co-ordinator in the team, tasks, individual responsibilities and workloads should be delegated appropriately by the senior research co-ordinator or principal investigator of the study. There should be adequate leave cover and the research co-ordinator should be prepared for the role by undergoing relevant training and education. Research co-ordinators working in isolation should be provided the opportunity for collaboration amongst peers and the wider network. In terms of remuneration, individual units and research co-ordinators are encouraged to negotiate compensation for weekend or overtime work, for example, extra pay or time in lieu (Roberts *et al* 2011, Eastwood *et al* 2012).

Overall, research co-ordinators enjoy a high level of autonomy and input into research process and they should be kept informed on their work progress and provided the opportunity to review career pathways. In addition, hospital management should provide adequate recognition for great work and advocate a long term or permanent position if they think that the research co-ordinator is adding value to the hospital profile.

8. Join us

Investigators and departments are encouraged to get in touch with the CTN office and the ARC. We'd love to assist you in getting started in research!

For more information, visit: <https://www.anzca.edu.au/research/anzca-clinical-trials-network/anaesthesia-research-co-ordinators>

Note: This original article by Dr Lauren Bulfin has been updated to reflect the latest information as of April 2025.

9. References

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