

Debbie A. Waldrop, RN, MSN, CCRC, is the director of research at Azalea Orthopedics in Tyler, Texas, a private practice orthopedic site that participates in device studies, clinical trials, and investigator-initiated research. She is also an adjunct professor with the Associate Degree in Nursing program at Tyler Junior College.



Q: Can you tell us how you first became interested in clinical research, and describe a little bit about the path you took to get involved with your career?

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A: I graduated from nursing school in Toronto in the late 1970s, and went to work in the Intensive Care Unit at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. It was a teaching- and research-focused facility. I was fascinated by all the research they were doing there, but it wasn't until I transferred to the University of Texas Health Center at Tyler (UTHCT) that I had the opportunity to start my career in research. I became the hospital's first nursing research coordinator for a National Cancer Institute-sponsored monoclonal antibody study. I went on to help other departments start their research projects and eventually assisted with the creation of the Center for Clinical Research at UTHCT.

I later joined the nursing facility at The University of Texas at Tyler and fulfilled a dream I had to conduct my own research. My co-worker and I were able to obtain a large Health Resources and Service Administration grant and established a school-based health clinic in rural Texas, where I live. Since then, I have started three other research offices and have maintained several positions as the Director of Research.

Q: How about your involvement in ACRP? When did you first get involved, and what type of benefits have you enjoyed from being a member?

A: I became involved in ACRP in the late 1980s, and was a founding member of the North Texas Chapter. I remember meeting with a small group of fellow Canadians at one of the ACRP annual meetings and discussing forming a Canadian chapter. I didn't have the opportunity to assist my fellow countrymen in that endeavor, but it was formed, and I continue to be a member of the Canada Chapter to this day. I am very proud of what they have accomplished. I am currently helping to establish an East Texas Chapter.

I have enjoyed attending more than 20 ACRP annual meetings (I've stopped counting), and have had the privilege of presenting several times on topics involving study site performance, pharmacology, and ethical issues.

I have definitely benefited from being a member of ACRP for the last 30-plus years (I've stopped counting). I took the first Certified Clinical Research Coordinator (CCRC) exam in 1992, back when no course or study books were available. I'm glad I took it, because the designation told sponsors that our site had staff with the knowledge to properly manage their studies. I believe certification also helped me to be appointed to serve on several national boards of directors, such as the Medical and Scientific Advisory Board for the Alpha-1 Foundation.

Q: Since your career has spanned several years and you have no doubt seen many changes, what advice do you have for others about using technology to advance their careers?

A: It's imperative to keep up with the "latest and greatest" in technology. At a study site, it is important to demonstrate to sponsors that you are on the cutting edge and are willing to learn and make changes to improve your site's performance. A lot of the programs available now actually help you streamline activities and make your job easier, so you can spend more time on important things, like attending to your study subjects.

Q: What about your personal goals? Where do you see your career path heading?

A: I see my path as a "mentor," and I want to share my knowledge in a "pay it forward" fashion. I have been a mentor for junior high school girls by introducing them to the world of research at our annual "Expanding Your Horizons" symposium. I developed a program called "Gummy Bears versus Jelly Beans: Research in Action." The girls sign a "Candyland Informed Consent Form," and then they are randomized into two groups. We perform a statistical analysis to see which candy tastes better. We'd offer the program three times during the symposium day and it was always full. The girls were so pumped up about research after the presentation that they all wanted to be study coordinators, pharmacists, or to work for a pharmaceutical company. I believe that giving this presentation and others I have done (for patient groups, nurses, and investigators) was the reason I received the "Advancing Public Awareness in Clinical Research" award from ACRP in 2013, which was such a great honor for me.

Another way I am paying it forward is by working at Azalea Orthopedics. I am so excited about the opportunity to introduce many of the physicians and surgeons to device and clinical drug trials.

In the future, I see myself continuing to work as a consultant to assist other sites in developing their research programs, and I will continue to be an adjunct nursing professor. I love to teach students, and I get to interact with patients at the same time. In my mind, helping with research and having the opportunity to be a nursing instructor means having the best of both worlds.

Q: As you think about the future generation of clinical research professionals, what three "lessons learned" would you like to share?

A: As a preface to my three lessons, I'd say that to be successful, you have to have a great team. We all know the roles of the sites and sponsors, and of the clinical research coordinators and associates, but there are others on this team who are often not given the credit they deserve. An excellent team embraces everyone at their facility.

First, I would say recognize and properly train individuals involved at your site so that they can perform optimally. Our research team members start at the front end with the check-in clerks who greet our research patients, and go all the way to those who handle the back end processes, including the billing clerks and other critical staff.

Second, not only do we need to recognize all the players on our team, but we also need to say "thank you" to them. Yes, their duties may be a part of their job description, but everybody likes to feel valuable and appreciated.

Third, share your knowledge. If staff have been adequately trained, their confidence levels and self-esteem will increase, as will their productivity. I have never agreed with the "micromanager" type of approach, and I encourage people to work more independently.

Q: Do you have any closing thoughts you would like to share?

A: Having the opportunity to play a part in delivering "tomorrow's medicine today" has been an awesome career for me. My advice would be to never stop learning and to embrace change. Don't doubt yourself; if you want something bad enough, you can make it happen and achieve your goals.



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