

CASE STUDY

From pharmacy practice to clinical research



Abi Downham is a Specialist Pharmacy Technician – Clinical Trials at University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust, supporting patients to take part safely in clinical research at Worthing Hospital. Having progressed from a Pharmacy Assistant through training and ward-based roles, Abi now specialises in clinical trials pharmacy, combining medicines management with patient care. Motivated by both professional experience and personal connections to research, Abi applied to the NIHR Health and Care Professionals Internship to build her research knowledge, develop new skills, and contribute to improving patient safety and medicines optimisation within clinical trial settings.

Tell us a little about your current role and what you enjoy most about your work?

I currently work in the Clinical Trials Pharmacy team at Worthing Hospital, where I support patients taking part in Clinical Trials by dispensing medications and helping them manage their treatments safely. I enjoy the variety the role offers and the opportunity to learn something new every day. Most of all, I find it rewarding to interact with patients and support them throughout their treatment journey.

What first inspired you to pursue a career in health and care? Tell us about your professional journey so far?

I joined the hospital in March 2019 as a Pharmacy Assistant, where I gained experience dispensing medications, managing stock for wards, and handling deliveries from wholesalers. This role gave me a solid foundation and confirmed my interest in progressing within pharmacy.

In September 2020, I was successful in enrolling on the Pharmacy Technician course, which I completed over two years. During this time, I developed key skills including accuracy checking and medicines reconciliation.

In October 2022, I progressed to a Higher-Level Pharmacy Technician role, working on inpatient wards. In this position, I carried out medicines reconciliations and worked closely with the multidisciplinary team to support patients throughout their hospital journey. In August 2025, I successfully specialised as a Clinical Trials Pharmacy Technician, where I now support patients participating in clinical research.

**What motivated you to apply for the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Health and Care Professionals Internship?**

I was motivated to apply because I am keen to continue developing my career and gain experience in research and Phase I trial units which I haven't formally explored before. As I didn't go to university, I'm particularly motivated by opportunities that allow me to learn and grow through practical experiences.

This internship stood out to me as it is a way for me to build my knowledge, develop new skills and gain a further insight into research side of healthcare. I saw this internship as a valuable opportunity to broaden my perspective beyond my current role.

What areas of research or improvement in health and care are you most passionate about? I'm interested in improving how patients understand and manage their medications, as I regularly support patients with this. I think there's a real opportunity to enhance patient education and involvement in their own care, which can lead to better outcomes.

Was there a particular moment or experience that sparked your interest in research?

My interest in research has been strongly influenced by personal experience. My grandad took part in a clinical trial for prostate cancer, which has allowed him to still be here today. More recently, my dad is currently participating in a clinical trial to try stabilising his brain cancer.

Seeing the first-hand impact that clinical trials and research can have on patients and their families has been incredibly meaningful to me, showing me the importance of research and developing new treatments. This, alongside my professional experience working within clinical trials has motivated me to become more involved in research and contribute to improving care for others.

Have you had any previous involvement in research or service improvement? What did you learn from it?

My current role allows me to have a good understanding of how research is conducted in practice. In terms of service improvement, I've been able to bring experience from my previous role into my current position. Being able to complete medicines reconciliations on the patients participating in trials has improved the accuracy of medication histories and will continue to lead to safer prescribing and medication management. I learnt that even a small change in practice can have a meaningful impact on patient safety and overall care.



How do you see research complementing your day-to-day clinical or professional practice?

Research complements my day-to-day practice by helping ensure that the medications we provide are safe, effective, and clinically appropriate, based on the latest evidence outlined in trial protocols. I can see how research directly impacts patients' treatments and outcomes.

What skills do you hope to build or strengthen through research exposure?

Through the exposure in this internship, I'm hoping to build a stronger understanding of how research is designed, conducted and translated into practice in other Clinical Trial Research Facilities. I believe this is an opportunity to grow both professionally and personally, through gaining confidence and more experience within multidisciplinary teams.

What do you hope to gain from the internship experience?

I hope to build the knowledge and confidence to better understand how evidence is generated, evaluated, and applied in practice, and to become more comfortable engaging with research teams and discussions.

How do you plan to use the learning from the programme in your current role or service?

I would hope to apply this learning to future developments within my organisation. For example, if University Hospitals Sussex were to explore the development of a Phase I clinical trials unit, I would feel better equipped to contribute to early discussions and support the setup process from a practical and informed perspective, beyond just pharmacy input.

Are there specific types of projects or research areas you are particularly keen to explore?

I am keen to explore research that focuses on patient safety and medicines optimisation within a clinical trial setting, particularly how we can improve the safe and effective use of medicines throughout a patient's treatment journey.

How do you think this opportunity will support your professional development?

It will give me the chance to learn from experienced researchers and see how different teams approach research delivery. I see this as an important learning opportunity that will help me grow professionally, and it will also provide a strong foundation for future roles in healthcare research, by building the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to progress further in this area.



What difference do you hope your learning will make to patients, colleagues or your wider service?

While the impact may not be immediate, I see this learning as an important foundation that will enable me to contribute more meaningfully to patients, colleagues, and research-focused services in the future.

Looking ahead, how would you like your role in research or evidence-based practice to develop?

I would like to progress into a role where I am more actively contributing to research and supporting the development of evidence that can directly improve patient care and outcomes.

What does being part of this internship programme mean to you personally?

It means putting myself first and taking the next step in my career to progress. It's a valuable chance for me to gain exposure to resources I haven't had before.

What do you find most exciting about taking this next step?

I'm most excited to build on my current experience, learning about how other Clinical Research Facilities operate and see what I can bring back to my trust.