Nursing's commitment to evidence-based practice requires nursing researchers' orientation toward practice-based research. A pioneering collaboration between Connecticut Children's Medical Center (CCMC) and the School of Nursing will provide both with a nationally renowned researcher and expanded research capacity.

According to Dean Regina Cusson, a specialist in maternal and child health, a joint appointment with CCMC allowed the School of Nursing to attract a national leader in neonatal nursing who will bridge academic-practice gaps. And Cheryl Hoey, RN, Vice President of Clinical Services and Chief Nursing Officer at CCMC, has observed, “When I arrived at Connecticut Children’s 18 months ago, I was pleased to find we had interested nurses who began a committee to develop nursing research.”

The email signature of Dr. Jacqueline McGrath, newly appointed Associate Dean for Research and Scholarship in the School of Nursing with a joint appointment as CCMC’s director of nursing research, boldly proclaims, “True leadership is seeing the brilliance in other people!” This axiom serves as the motto of a career clinician who came to academia almost accidentally. She first distinguished herself as a leading graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and then at Arizona State University and Virginia Commonwealth University before coming to UConn.

“No one gets where they are by themselves,” McGrath observes. “I would not be where I am without being part of a team.” She cites Dr. Greer Glazer, now dean of the University of Cincinnati's College of Nursing, as one of her early mentors; McGrath met her in her master's program at Kent State University.
McGrath’s personal commitment to mentorship led her to accept the unique position for which CCMC and UConn actively recruited her: working with staff nurses to develop research agendas for improved patient outcomes and preparing CCMC for Magnet Recognition. She has worked with the staff nurses to establish the CCMC Institute for Nursing Research and Evidence-based Practice to support them in their journey toward excellence.

“Jackie has assisted our staff in understanding how nursing research can thrive in an acute care setting, and how to put that new knowledge into practice. I can’t imagine a better partnership,” says CCMC’s Hoey.

In addition, as a faculty member at UConn’s School of Nursing, McGrath has enthusiastically thrown herself into serving as a mentor for students in the undergraduate Honors Program, doctoral students, and junior faculty. She has been actively engaged with students and faculty in research grant development as well as serving as co-author of research articles to nudge her fledglings out of the doctoral program nest.

After prolific research and publishing careers in Arizona and Virginia, McGrath acknowledges there are several challenges in moving to a new region even with her well established research trajectory in neonatal nursing. First, she is establishing a new team: “That means meeting with new people and learning two different systems, both of which take time. I also need to show results quickly, so I’ve worked with the nursing staff to dig out existing data, and then support the dissemination of these data through co-authorship with CCMC nurses.” As an editorial board member of Newborn & Infant Nursing Reviews and column editor for the Family Dynamics column, McGrath also shepherds clinical nurses who are graduate students through writing and publishing pieces for the quarterly columns. The second challenge is to balance the demands of both institutions: “A joint appointment can end up like two full-time jobs.”

McGrath’s trajectory of research is related to improving outcomes for extremely preterm infants and their families. She has developed and is testing a parent participative intervention, “NICU-PLAY,” with good results. Through this intervention provided in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), families increase their active participation in caregiving (PLAY) right from birth. This is a critical period of brain development, facilitating neuropathway development.

Along with her commitment to mentoring, McGrath also evangelizes on behalf of researchers’ thinking strategically about their legacy or succession planning. She notes that many productive research trajectories wither and die because junior faculty have not been prepared to take the place of retiring senior faculty. This lapse has many sources: “As academic researchers we’re evaluated as though this is an individual sport. The tenure and promotion process that we’re judged by gets us there.” Working alongside many stellar faculty and researchers, she observes, “I’ve often had the occasion to observe, ‘Eagles were never meant to flock together.’” The outline of a presentation that McGrath recently gave at CCMC aptly summarizes her career and the energy that she has already brought to UConn’s School of Nursing: Find your passion. Embrace the evidence. Make a difference.