

Inspiring young minds on health research: school visit to St. Joseph's Catholic Infant and Junior Schools in Birtley for Careers Week

An interactive school initiative aims to inspire and educate young minds about what research is about.



Dan Duhren and Caroline Fletcher from the NIHR Clinical Research Network North East and North Cumbria (NIHR CRN NENC) kicked off 2024 with a visit to St. Joseph's Catholic Infant and Junior Schools in Birtley as part of the school's Careers Week. They provided research workshops aimed at inspiring students ranging from 4-year-olds in Reception class to 11-year-olds in Year 6.

St. Joseph's Catholic Infant and Junior Schools, Birtley, are two schools from the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust who are working in partnership with NIHR CRN NENC.

This visit marked an exciting start for NIHR CRN NENC to engage with the community and schools, aiming to raise awareness about the world of health research and inspire young minds to consider a future in this field.

Dan emphasised the importance of making research easy for children to understand: "We wanted to demystify what research is - it's not just trials in the lab, not something unreachable. We hope to broaden children's perspectives and let them know that research is connected to us day-to-day."

Dan and Caroline captivated the students with an interactive and engaging session. They provided a clear explanation of health research, emphasising its power to prevent, treat, and diagnose various diseases. They also delved into the history of research, paying tribute to the contributions of James Lind, who discovered the cure for scurvy in sailors.

A highlight of the session was the hands-on 'fish tank' experiment, where a substance was added to a pretend fish tank to turn the water to jelly. The kids experimented with adding different powders to the fish tank to test which one would turn the water back to liquid to save the 'fish'.

The experiment was designed to explain the concept of research in a relatable and engaging manner. The pupils participated eagerly by measuring and collecting data, while younger children enjoyed observing and recording the correct powder and quantity. Dan and Caroline connected the dots by using examples of day-to-day products that resulted from research, such as toothpaste, Calpol, and x-rays. This helped the children understand the importance of research and how it affects their lives.

The atmosphere during the session was vibrant. The children asked thought-provoking questions and enthusiastically shared their insights, demonstrating their thirst for knowledge. Teachers at St. Joseph's Catholic Infant and Junior Schools praised the initiative, recognising its age-appropriate nature and the immense value it brought to the students' understanding: "The activities were well pitched at the children's level and promoted great understanding and enthusiasm. The children found the workshop wonderfully engaging: being involved in an experiment to replicate the process by which the NIHR carried out research really helped them understand the purpose and process of their research. The children left the workshop feeling empowered to get involved in research themselves and were given clear instruction on how to do this, either now or as an adult."

Reflecting on the experience, Dan and Caroline expressed their excitement and desire to continue such activities in the future. Caroline stated: "I want to do it again! The lasting memories and the positive impact we make through these experiments are truly rewarding. The effect of this pilot session on the students and ourselves has exceeded our expectations."

The pilot session at St. Joseph's Catholic Infant and Junior Schools has set the stage for a promising future of similar initiatives. Dan, Caroline, and the team are already planning further school visits during the summer term, with a vision to expand their reach beyond Newcastle and involve adults and families in the journey. As their plans develop, more schools will have the opportunity to be part of this educational initiative, inspiring children to explore the exciting world of health research.

