



Research – getting started



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For most of us, research is a word remote from our everyday lives. Our first introduction to research in general practice kicked off rather remotely at the Registrar Research Workshop held in Broken Hill, New South Wales. Here we were inspired by experienced researchers, teachers and the 'guru of general practice', Professor John Murtagh. We networked with university professors for whom research is a way of life, and learnt from some of our predecessors who were in the midst of their own small research projects. We returned to Sydney enthused and keen to get started.

Such was our enthusiasm, we both started a year working in research at the General Practice Unit at Fairfield Hospital. Here we were surrounded by a keen and supportive research team headed by Professor Nicholas Zwar, author of many research studies. We also had support, advice and assistance with skills development through the University of New South Wales Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) Program.

The first few months were trying times, as the learning curve was steeper than we expected. We quickly realised that we had little idea what research actually involved. First of all, we had to formulate a research idea, propose a method, plan project timelines, stretch limited resources and determine the feasibility of the study. We found that we were lacking in the very basic research skills – such as literature searching – and spent many hours in the library learning

to use the internet and various electronic databases. We were fortunate that our local hospital library was running introductory sessions on Medline, CIAP and the Cochrane database. We even had to learn a new vocabulary to describe our research correctly.

It took so much longer than we expected to get to the exciting part of the project actually starting. We were introduced to an ethics application – all 30 pages and 18 copies! Once we had cleared this hurdle, our questionnaires had to be reconsidered and rewritten many times over after numerous meetings with the experienced researchers in our unit. Little did we realise how much thought went into each word in a questionnaire. We were also introduced to the concept of qualitative methods and focus groups, which were conducted as part of the project. The excitement of focus group meetings waned as we stared at the very large amount of information gathered (which had to be laboriously transcribed before being analysed). Along the way, we have also applied for grants to help finance our research studies. This involved a great deal of work and gave us a taste of some of the challenges of conducting research.

We are looking forward to presenting and sharing our findings at national and local conferences, and writing a report and submitting this for publication in a suitable quality peer reviewed journal.

Research is integral to the continued advancement of medical knowledge and

we hope this translates into benefits for our patients. Research conducted in general practice in particular, plays an important role in contributing to real improvements in medical care provision at the primary level.

All in all, the experience has been very worthwhile. We have learnt a great deal about the rigours of research that we could not have otherwise gained. It has increased our understanding of the principles of evidence based medicine and taught us to think critically about our own practice. This will continue to play a part in our future careers as general practitioners by helping us evaluate and improve the care we provide to our patients.

We would encourage other would-be researchers to take the opportunity to partake in the process of discovering new information.

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