



My novice research experience

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In medical school I was not interested in research, and just concentrated on passing exams. 'Evidence based medicine' (EBM) was the new buzz phrase, but was not a big part of the curriculum. It was during my general practice training that I realised the importance of EBM and using the best available evidence to guide clinical decisions.¹ This in turn sparked my interest in research. A monthly Registrar Research and Development Officer article in the RACGP newsletter inspired me to improve my EBM skills and look into research as an interesting career twist.²

I became an undergraduate teacher and met local university primary health care researchers. I attended a PHCRED workshop that taught basic research skills and the PHCRED team invited me to join a pilot study collecting data (I saw a research project develop from the grassroots level). Later I attended a RACGP Registrar Research Workshop where I met registrars and experienced general practitioner researchers from around Australia – I made the decision to become actively involved in research.

I then heard about the Research Development Program positions on offer in 2004. What an opportunity this was for me to take on a research position – without a long term commitment if it was not for me. It has been one of the most interesting and enjoyable jobs I have had.

When I commenced the research position, a supervisor asked me to do a literature search regarding the use of medical record auditing in research. By doing the literature search I formed my own research questions:

'What is the quality of GP medical records?' and 'How complete are they?' I realised there were data available from the pilot study I had been involved with that could be used to answer these questions. The benefit for a new researcher to start with a small project where the data has already been collected is that it saves months waiting for ethics clearance and data collection.³ The project has given me an opportunity to write a research proposal, literature review and article.

I have also become involved as a team member with other projects. For example, writing a grant application with a supervisor about primary prevention in cardiovascular disease, and auditing medical records in a study about spirometry in general practice. My supervisors mentor and challenge me. I would advise new researchers to find a supervisor or mentor by contacting the local university departments of general practice, or the RACGP.

I have faced key challenges as a new researcher. Learning about computer technology, databases and software programs are examples. I have succeeded in learning software programs by actively using them after a tutorial, instead of forgetting the skills that were taught. I have also learnt about formatting styles, such as Vancouver, for article writing.

Novice researchers often struggle with writing.⁴ I too have struggled, and sought advice and editing from experienced researchers. Writing a grant application was the trickiest challenge because of its unique terminology. Nor was I immune to anxiety from oral presentations. But I have

become more confident by giving PowerPoint presentations to small groups in my workplace and doing undergraduate teaching. Feedback following the presentations has been useful.

The key challenges I encountered with the research fellowship have actually turned out to be opportunities to extend myself and have had a positive effect on my research experience.

Tips for GPs interested in doing research

- Look out for opportunities such as workshops to learn research skills.
- After a workshop utilise the new skills acquired so they are not forgotten.
- Find a supervisor or mentor.
- Start with small projects or link in with projects already underway.
- Writing is a skill that requires practise and plenty of drafts.
- Never miss an opportunity to do an oral presentation.

References

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