

Training matters

Everything you ever wanted to know about research but were afraid to ask

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Trainees beginning their careers in psychiatry sometimes view research as an additional hurdle that they have to surmount in order to gain senior registrar or consultant status. Conversely, research enthusiasts may see research as an exciting and rewarding activity which enriches and informs clinical practice. The aim of this article is to strike a balance between these two divergent views to help trainees in their selection of the research option most suited to their temperament and aspirations. As a result of our own experiences of full-time and part-time research, in addition to research conducted during full-time clinical posts, we intend this article to be practically rather than theoretically orientated.

Why do it?

Being brutally honest, most trainees would have to admit that their main reason for acquiring a good research record is to enhance their prospects of gaining a senior registrar or consultant post. Fortunately, however, there are other satisfactions to be gained from doing research. Even undertaking a small research project enables the trainee to evaluate much more critically the scientific literature, an essential skill for every psychiatrist to master. Research also provides trainees with a different sort of intellectual stimulation and the opportunity to acquire new skills, write papers and possibly gain a higher degree. In addition, a year of full-time research at registrar or senior registrar level counts as part of higher psychiatric training. Applications can be made to the Joint Committee for Higher Psychiatric Training for further periods of research time to be considered as higher training when applying for consultant posts.

Different research options

The time available for a trainee to do research ranges from snatched evenings and weekends to the 'luxury' of a full-time research post. Possibilities include a

weekly senior registrar study day, half-time tutor/lecturer posts, six month research posts on registrar schemes as well as longer full-time research posts, either as a registrar or senior registrar of 1–3 years.

Some of the longer research posts may not be widely available and are not everyone's cup of tea. However, even in the most infertile and hostile research environments, the completion of a small project while working as a registrar should be feasible and need not involve Herculean efforts.

Points to look out for

(a) Scope of the project

It is essential to tailor the scope of the project to the time available. One of the major causes of demoralisation and disillusionment with research, is the undertaking of an overambitious project that cannot possibly be completed in the time available. Studies involving clinical interviews, and in particular treatment or follow-up studies, are inevitably time-consuming and should probably be avoided if research time is limited. A case notes study or a cross-sectional study involving self-report questionnaires would be more suitable for trainees in full-time clinical posts.

(b) Choosing a supervisor

A vital ingredient in the production of a successful research project is the careful selection of a supervisor. While trainees may wait until supervisors suggest a project for them to be involved in, we would strongly suggest that trainees should actively seek out and choose their own supervisors. Qualities to look for in a supervisor include:

- (i) a history of supervising previous trainees who have actually *completed* and *published* their research. Such a supervisor is likely to have a practical and realistic grasp of what can be achieved in the time available. If the trainee is planning to complete a higher degree, it is wise

to choose a supervisor with experience of supervising completed masters or doctoral dissertations.

- (ii) enthusiasm and approachability
- (iii) similar research interest, e.g. clinical, social, laboratory work
- (iv) access to research funds.

Trainees should not be deterred from making an approach if initially they do not have an idea for a project, as a good supervisor should be able to help the trainee generate plans for several feasible and rewarding studies.

(c) *Nature of the project*

The practicalities of doing research can vary dramatically according to the nature of the project. When considering research projects, trainees must anticipate the likely structure of their working day. While one trainee may be temperamentally suited to the solitary nature of laboratory work, others may find this intolerable, and may prefer research that is more clinically orientated. Some trainees prefer to have complete control over their research enterprise, in which case, being a small cog in the wheel of a large research team may be frustrating.

(d) *Facilities*

Access to computing facilities and the availability of statistical assistance within the psychiatry department are important. Secretarial help, particularly in the preparation of questionnaires can be invaluable. Availability of office space and access to a telephone is often overlooked, but their absence can make life extremely difficult. A small investment in a computer/word processor of one's own can reduce the work load enormously, and we strongly recommend it.

Pitfalls to be aware of

(a) *Change in work style*

As the workload of clinical psychiatry is structured and demand led, one of the hardest adjustments in doing research is changing to a style of work that is unstructured and self-motivated. The newly appointed researcher may rapidly discover that the newfound joys of sneaking out to the cinema in the afternoon, quickly wear thin with the realisation that it is only his/her work which suffers. Drawing

up one's own timetable with structured periods for library work, reading, planning, liaison, etc is essential.

(b) *Loneliness*

Some research posts can be very lonely. Whereas clinical work often begins with a ward meeting with nursing staff over a cup of coffee, research often begins with a solitary drink in an isolated office (if you're lucky enough to have an office and kettle). The importance of losing many of the social aspects of work may not be anticipated by the trainee beforehand. In large research departments this may not be so much of a problem as the trainee will acquire a new peer group among research colleagues from different disciplines. However, in a small department, it may take time to adjust to the solitary nature of the work.

(c) *Financial loss*

The dedicated academic may recoil with distaste at the mention of sordid financial concerns. We must, however, point out that most full-time research posts involve a cut in salary, as UMTs are lost. This is compensated for by the liberation from on-call duties and if necessary, additional sessional or locum work in the evenings can easily be found. However trainees with large mortgages and families would need to carefully calculate any financial shortfall incurred by taking a research job.

Comments

A well planned, carefully thought out research project, with good supervision can be an extremely rewarding undertaking that results in both personal and professional benefits. A poorly planned, ill-considered, project with inadequate supervision may be a nightmare!

We have been fortunate that our own experience of research jobs has been very positive, and we have found them to be the most stimulating and enjoyable posts that we have undertaken so far, although spells of demoralisation were inevitable from time to time. We feel, however, that we would have benefited from prior knowledge of some of the more practical aspects of the work, and hope that the points we have raised above will help trainees make a more informed choice when considering research options.