

Preface

This book is designed to be read both by people for whom research is the beginning of an idea and by those who are just embarking on a project. It may also be useful to others, for instance, new supervisors – who are already experienced in their own research but perhaps not in helping others to get started. Even if you have already started in research, there are many useful sections that will also apply to you. The aim is to try to offer help and survival tips as you begin your time in research. Most of the text is based on our own experience, but observations and discussions with many friends and colleagues suggest that the difficulties people have are similar and probably avoidable.

We have no stronger claim to be experts on the process of research than anyone else. While our individual experiences were quite different, we had the benefit of working alongside some very bright, committed, and extremely supportive people during our time as research fellows. Largely through the support of clinical trainers, supervisors, and the understanding of families, we have been fortunate to continue with some aspects of research.

The original idea for this book was borne out of the day to day frustrations and near misses that were a normal pattern – certainly in the early days of our research. Many of those people with whom we have worked will recognize parts of this book as it includes many ideas that we have freely discussed over the years – in many ways, the only way this book could be written is by having listened to and combining the experience of those people we have been lucky enough to

work with. As time passes, it appears that many fellows are allowed to repeat the same mistakes – this has become clearer with time as we see more people go through the same process. Time in research is a huge chunk of an individual's life. It requires significant energy – both professional and emotional, financial commitments from grant giving bodies, financial sacrifice (compared with the salary of a clinician), and a huge commitment from a department and supervisor. In the past, we have all undertaken this without a guide or framework – it is no wonder that we all encountered such difficulties. We hope that this book will offer some useful suggestions of ways around these pitfalls.

It was put to us before starting research that it is far worse to have done research and have little or nothing to show for it than not to do it at all. This remains largely true. There continue to be many problems with research that will not change imminently. There will never be “enough” money, and as long as there is no official regulation from the grant bodies or colleges for clinicians, anyone can take on a research fellow and offer supervision. The outcome of research is rarely checked (apart from indirectly – by training committees, etc.) and it is still true that huge numbers of projects undertaken are not written up. Research has frequently been a means to an end for trainees to achieve points and make themselves more competitive in the application process for clinical jobs. It remains true that points can often be gained by having registered for and completed a higher degree. If this is your only motivation, you can expect increasing frustration as you encounter the inevitable trials and tribulations of research – if you lack a genuine interest or enthusiasm for your work, it will drive down the quality of what you achieve.

In competitive specialties, getting an edge over your peers can be difficult, and research may be one way of demonstrating commitment and an ability to work independently. However, in specialties where research has become so common as to be a virtual necessity, there will be examples of people who undertake a project purely to fill a gap in their CV. This is not a failing on their part as they often have little

option – although the system is changing to avoid this. Research postings should be regarded as precious commodities, not something given away as an interim post. If you are taking on a project or looking at doing research, then consider why you are doing it. If you are doing it because you have to – think again. Can you achieve your objective in other ways? If you find a desire to do research later because you want to, then it will be better for all concerned.

Once you have committed to the idea of research, careful planning is vital for success. The aim of this book is to help you through some aspects of that planning: rather than being a comprehensive guide to your project, it aims to help you anticipate problems and find solutions before they become a major disruption to your work.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a short, summary table giving the key points, giving you an outline of the chapter and, in some instances, acting as a checklist.

Whatever research you are undertaking, we hope that it is an exciting and enjoyable time for you. If you achieve this, then you and your supervisor have done a good job and you will have made a contribution to the knowledge base of your subject.

Consider the Context

At the time of writing, countless individuals have undertaken research in order to fill a box on their CV and make themselves more competitive in the job market. This outmoded approach is expensive and, when research is not completed, frankly wasteful. The authors hope to see this will continue to be regarded as an old-fashioned view of research – and with the increasing development of Academic Clinical Fellow and Clinical Lectureships, fully expect that it will.

Until then, the aim of this book is to help introduce an individual to research and guide them to overcome the early pitfalls. It should be recognized by every reader that we do not see research as an isolated event in a doctor's life but rather that it becomes something to build on as a part of

career progression. Ideally, you will go on to apply for further grants, take on research fellows, and encourage good research projects of your own as a supervisor. This can only come if you maximize your own opportunities. We hope that this book will go some way to encouraging you to do this, and perhaps, as you read on, you should consider the book in this context too.

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