

Trainee research in South-East Scotland*

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SUMMARY. I describe the experience of the South-East Scotland Faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners with trainee research projects during the last few years.

Introduction

ONE of the educational aims of any training is to develop an enquiring mind. This also applies to training programmes for vocational trainees in general practice. In addition to acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes, the trainee should also learn to audit his own performance and develop a healthy, critical appreciation of the clinical and organizational aspects of his trainer's practice.

With these objectives in mind, the Research Committee of the South-East Scotland Faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners decided to encourage the trainees to carry out a project during their trainee year. It would be an exercise in learning the basic methods of research in general practice and in learning to appreciate the immense potential general practice has to offer for research.

Need to inform trainees

Trainees need to be told at the beginning of their training period, either verbally or by circular, that opportunities are available to help them with a project and that the research committee of the local faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners would be glad to help them. They are told that this is an optional learning exercise.

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Need to interest trainers

Trainees find it easier to undertake projects if their trainers are highly motivated. Our second objective was therefore to interest the trainers. We approached them individually and found many of them enthusiastic, while others showed interest after attending one of the trainee research presentations (20 per cent in all).

Opportunities within the practice

What sort of projects can the trainee do? This depends on the facilities available in the practices. Geographical and social setting, practice premises, ancillary help, the system of patient care and any specialized services provided are all important. Different practices can offer different interests to trainees. We are therefore interested in finding out what a particular practice can offer and if the trainer himself has a particular interest.

Trainers need not worry if they have never done any research themselves. Time is limited and the project must be kept simple, involving perhaps the collection of unsophisticated data, clinical findings, or simple operational or attitude studies. Sometimes research projects are based on special opportunities which may arise within the practice, such as starting an appointment system, moving to a health centre, or engaging a practice nurse.

Whatever its basis it must not be too time consuming. Ideally the trainee should start a project at the beginning of the training programme and complete it by the end, with the possibility of extending the project later on if he wants to.

Group and individual discussion

We follow up our initial contact with trainees and trainers by group discussion with the trainees. South-East Scotland is divided into five areas for the purpose of the vocational training programme. We ask the associate advisers in general practice in these areas to nominate an interested trainee to be the group leader and convene a meeting of all other trainees in his area.

We discuss their interests and identify potential projects. So far we have not been able to carry out a project involving the whole group. We continue to keep in contact with each doctor individually, and encourage him to develop his own ideas.

Choice of subject

The choice of subject depends on the trainee's past hospital experience, the practice facilities, and his own interest. It is essential that he or she will enjoy doing it.

Information

Once the subject has been chosen the trainee is encouraged to read what has already been written about it. *New Reading for General Practitioners*, produced quarterly from the College Library, is helpful. This Library's photocopying service for members and associates is also much used and appreciated.

We introduce the trainees to people locally who have done similar research or who might be able to help them to get more information about their subjects. These are not only general practitioners but hospital consultants and outside agencies.

Method

The trainee is advised at this stage to write down his objectives, his working schedule, and a proforma. Help may also be needed from a statistician. He is then asked to work for a short period to see if his project is viable and to find out whether he wants to continue.

Once the project is under way, it is essential that the trainee should receive continuous encouragement either from the trainer or one of the members of the local research committee in order to keep up his interest.

Presentation

When their projects have been completed and written up, the trainees are encouraged to present them at a meeting. For the past two years, we have arranged this as an evening function, to which all trainees, trainers, and members of the faculty are invited. Participants are given small prizes and refreshments are provided by a drug firm.

Publication

After the presentation of a project, we discuss its suitability for publication. Time available for projects is limited; trainees are encouraged to continue their study using larger samples, even after they have completed their traineeship. Some of the papers presented have been of excellent quality and we hope will be published in the future, though none have been so far.

Financial help

Most of these projects are done with little financial help. Expenses are met through the practice or faculty,

but small grants are sometimes available from the Scientific Foundation Board of the College, the Scottish Research Support Unit, the Health Board, or pharmaceutical industry. Trainees are also reminded that they can apply to the College for an Astra/RCGP award.

Conclusion

We believe this experiment has been a worthwhile educational exercise. Trainees have had a unique opportunity of studying disease processes, attitudes, organization, and methods of general practice research, from which they have surely benefited. It does not matter if only a few trainees are interested (20 per cent of our trainees showed interest originally, 15 per cent started projects, and about 10 per cent completed them); nor does it matter whether the project produces any worthwhile result or whether a similar project has already been done: it is still a valuable learning exercise for the trainee.

Research Committees of the College are often at a loss to identify their objectives. Encouraging and guiding young practitioners and trainers with general practice research could well be one of their aims. Our Research Committee certainly found that encouraging trainee projects was a worthwhile contribution to the education of trainees in our area.

Addendum

The following projects were presented in 1977 and 1978:

Use of a practice nurse.
Diabetes in general practice.
Use of surgery posters in health education.
Review of family planning in general practice.
Fits in general practice.
Age/sex register in a training practice in South-East Scotland.
Doctor-initiated patient follow-up in general practice.
Doctor's behaviour towards patient's expectation in management of a self-limiting condition.
Survey of patients' attitudes to doctors of different age and sex.
Analysis of self-poisoning in a new town.

Portable ultra-sound device

A pilot study on the use on 45 occasions of a portable ultra-sound device in general practice has been reported by the Scottish General Practitioner Research Unit. This took place in three Scottish general practices and was primarily used for obstetrics.

Reference

Dingwall, D. W., Hogg, B. S. & Knox, J. D. E. (1979). A portable ultra-sound device in general practice—a pilot study. *Health Bulletin*, 37, 63-65.