Clinical Research by Medical Students

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Medical education is very demanding and students need to show excellent commitment to rise up the ladder to reach positions of clinical research and patient care. The medical curriculum is such that medical students are so busy, ever pressed for time, moving from examinations to examinations. Even in undergraduate learning the demands of studying medicine are extraordinary. While established medical knowledge is learnt these days nationally and internationally medical schools are including a research project as either a requirement under the syllabus curriculum or a highly encouraged option. Many western universities encourage clinical research during the summer vacation especially in the early years of medical schooling as an introduction to research project planning, clinical data gathering, analysis of the data thus gathered and deriving relevant conclusions. In fact the Australian government is now supporting research by medical students with a specific category of scholarship funding from National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) undertaking a combined MBBS/PhD or MD/PhD program.[1] Even in the Indian context clinical research questions are addressed by medical undergraduate students in their Community Medicine course curriculum and appropriate projects are carried out.

Research training and experience is not a "nice thing" to have but a "must have" for doctors of the future. Increased research training in medical education will help in a student's professional growth, their evolving clinical practice and ultimately for the health of patients and the communities they serve.

Demonstrated research experience at medical schools is increasingly important in obtaining positions in postgraduate training programmes. Recognition of the importance of health and medical research in developing and applying the skills and knowledge acquired in their medical studies has seen many prominent medical schools include research training and productivity in the form of publications in their selection of trainees. The competition for these positions are often fierce and a professional resume which includes well conducted clinical research studies and publications is a must for proper selection.

A research experience is often the first time a medical student writes and records clearly and coherently what they do and think. These can contribute to developing lasting habits of critical thinking. This mindset can be developed through clinical research. This critical thinking is needed in clinical medicine and population health where critical appraisal of new evidence and engagement with new ideas is a continuous process. This mindset contributes to stimulating ongoing interest in learning, a sense of personal satisfaction and eagerness to participate in discovery and learning as part of a team. Research is rarely done in isolation and developing a critical inquiry mindset in an individual and a team encourages clinical research and publications in the long term. Research performance enhances professional esteem and progression. Evidence based medicine is thus encouraged. Inducting medical students and postgraduates quite early into clinical research ensures that better patient care and patient outcomes happen and healthier societies are built in the long term. This recognition has led to incorporation of research into successful undergraduate and postgraduate training programmes.

How to incorporate these ideas of research training into medical education curriculum bringing maximum benefits? It is recognised that protected time should be assigned for clinical research.[3] This can be as a part of the curriculum or as an optional program. Maximising time allotted for clinical research will aid in getting more quality outcomes. Mentoring by the senior faculty is essential to get the best results.[2] Research experiences for students and postgraduate trainees that combine mentorship and protected time will deliver the best

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benefits to our future clinical leaders and society as they lead to quality work, better publications and improved knowledge and practice.

Future clinicians have to be prepared for a lifelong learning process. The continued rapid explosion in knowledge and advances in technology have changed the practice of clinical medicine so much that it is a challenge to keep up with the learning process. It is recognised that researchers make better clinicians. Research exposure increases understanding of clinical medicine, facilitates critical thinking and critical appraisal, improves prospects of successful application of postgraduate training, grants and high impact publications, develops teamwork, skills and increases exposure to the best clinical minds.

Finally the editorial team is appealing to medical students and postgraduate trainees to utilise research opportunities in medical schools and beyond to better personal and professional benefits, thus improving patient outcomes and the health of the community in general. This and subsequent issues of IMA Kerala Medical Journal will feature articles detailing research activities performed by medical students and postgraduates with senior faculty supervision.

END NOTE

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