

Psychiatric trainees' research experiences and activities in the Eastern region of Ireland

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A questionnaire addressing various aspects of research activity was administered to 172 trainees in the Eastern region of Ireland. An 80% ($n=138$) response rate was achieved. While 98% of trainees regarded research activity as important, almost half rated their research opportunities as poor. The commonest reasons cited for doing research included c.v. enhancement, personal interest and consultant pressure. The most frequently reported problems in doing research were time allocation, funding and adequate supervision.

Involvement in research is an important component in professional development and career progression. An understanding of research methods is valuable for critically assessing scientific and promotional literature (Owens *et al.*, 1995) and for evaluating standards of practice in psychiatry. Furthermore, various studies (Katona & Robertson, 1993) indicate the importance of having research publications when applying for senior registrar posts. Trainees' experiences of the research process have been investigated in numerous studies conducted in Britain (Junaid & Staines, 1990; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1991; Bartlett & Drummond, 1992). This paper presents a comprehensive study of the attitudes and activities of psychiatric trainees in the Eastern region of Ireland.

The study

Between April and July 1995, all doctors occupying recognised training posts (172) in the Eastern region of Ireland received a postal questionnaire from the Association of Psychiatrists Training in Ireland (APTI). Topics covered in the questionnaire included trainee attitudes towards research, specific difficulties in conducting research and research activity of trainees. Differences between various categories were examined using χ^2 analysis.

Findings

The response rate was 80% ($n=138$). Psychiatric experience of trainees ranged from six months to 13 years (mean 3.4 years; s.d.=2.4). Twenty-two per cent ($n=30$) of respondents had obtained the MRCPsych examination.

The vast majority ($n=135$) of trainees considered involvement in research to be important (44%) or very important (54%) in the context of their overall training. Only three respondents (2%) considered involvement in research unimportant. When asked what they considered "important reasons for doing research", 124 (90%) cited c.v. enhancement, 101 (73%) cited personal interest and 39 (28%) cited consultant pressure.

Trainees were then asked to indicate areas which they regarded as "very important in securing a senior registrar position". The responses are listed in Table 1. "Number of publications" and "completed research" were the most frequently suggested items.

Trainees were asked to rate the research opportunities in their careers to date; 46% felt these had been poor, 43% felt that they had been fair and 11% felt they had been good. Those who

Table 1. Items considered very important in securing a senior registrar post in psychiatry ($n=138$)

	%
Number of publications	78.3
Completed research	74.6
Quality of references	54.3
Interpersonal skills	46.4
Clinical skills	45.7
Degree other than MRCPsych	35.5
Teaching experience	35.5
Acquainted with interviewers	33.3
Rotation of origin	29.7
Managerial skills	26.8
Age compared with other candidates	5.1
Medical school attended	4.3

rated their opportunities as fair or good were more likely to be post-membership in status ($P < 0.05$).

More than half of the respondents (57%) reported current research activity. However, most respondents (77%, $n=104$) had no research publications to their credit. Of these, 43% were already actively involved in research, another 43% were interested in the idea but not yet active and 14% were not interested in conducting research. Of the 23% ($n=32$) who reported having research publications, half were post-membership.

The commonest problems encountered by trainees in their attempts to conduct research included time allocation (66%) and funding (51%).

The sources of research supervision reported were 'self only' in 20 cases, 'consultant or senior registrar' in 63 cases and 'academic department' in only eight cases. Those who had achieved publication were more likely to report being supervised by an academic department than the non-published ($P < 0.05$). Those who were active in research but not published were more likely to be self-supervising ($P < 0.02$).

Comment

The response rate compares favourably with similar studies conducted in Britain which range from 33% (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1991) to 86% (Junaid & Staines, 1990). The findings reflect a heavy emphasis on research activity in career enhancement. While research is undoubtedly an important component in training, it should not be overemphasised to the neglect of developing other necessary skills. This danger is highlighted by elements perceived as important in securing a senior registrar post. Clinical skills and managerial experience were considered relatively unimportant compared with number of publications.

It was disappointing that nearly half of trainees rated their opportunities to conduct research as poor. Specific difficulties reported are similar to those reported in British studies (Junaid & Staines, 1990; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1991; Bartlett & Drummond, 1992). The tendency for relatively inexperienced researchers (unpublished) to supervise their own work is worrying and emphasises the need for active co-ordination of research activities by those super-

vising training programmes. That those who had successfully published were more likely to be supervised by an academic department stresses the central role for academic departments in encouraging and supervising research. More formal links between academic units and those working in sector areas (including the rotation of all trainees through the academic department) may help to ensure that trainees benefit from the stimulation of becoming involved in such research activity (Irish Psychiatric Training Committee, 1995).

The percentage of trainees actively involved in research is similar to the 50% reported by Stanway (1993) in Merseyside trainees. Improving education in research skills as well as the establishment of a research tutors' network in Ireland (Freeman, 1992) will improve supervision and increase opportunities for research. Proposals to increase the emphasis on research methodology in the membership examination should also encourage trainees to develop research abilities earlier in their career.

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