# Trainees' forum

## How useful is a six month research option for trainee psychiatrists?

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Shiwach & Murray (1986) have outlined why research experience is desirable for trainee psychiatrists. The majority will use their experience to gain a better understanding of publications in professional journals; however, only a minority will become full-time researchers. Although most trainees have a positive attitude to research (Davidson & Abou-Saleh, 1987; Burford, 1987) only a few manage to complete a project before the second part of the Membership examination (Kendell, 1984; Davidson & Abou-Saleh, 1987; Burford, 1987). Kendell has highlighted some of the difficulties encountered on the Edinburgh MPhil degree course. He fears that "rising standards of the College's Membership examination" might deter even some of the more determined registrars to take on an extra commitment while preparing for the MRCPsych examination.

However, an early start in research is important for future success. Shiwach & Murray (1986) pointed out that an understanding of basic sciences and clinical psychiatry are the best foundation for successful research in the field. This is in keeping with the finding that an intercalated science degree is four times more frequent in professors and readers of medical faculties and also predicts higher numbers of publications (Smith, 1988).

How can the dilemma be overcome? The Maudsley and Bethlem Royal Hospitals have traditionally attracted trainees with a high motivation for research; 42% of registrars were in academic posts at follow-up Davies & Stein (1963). The current joint rotation with King's College Hospital has 62 SHOs and registrars. Since April 1984 one six month research post has been available. Applicants for it are required to submit a detailed research protocol and four independent referees choose the most outstanding proposal. Since the start of the scheme there has been growing interest and the numbers of interested registrars has fluctuated between three and eight.

We have attempted to assess the value of this 'intercalated' six month post in overcoming the difficulties of carrying out research before the Membership examination.

### The study

We developed a brief questionnaire inquiring into the following areas: general satisfaction with the post, previous research experience, degrees and publications resulting from the post, aspirations for the future, and current appointment. We also collected some demographic data. We sent the questionnaire to all nine registrars who had completed the six month research post by October 1988. Doubtful points were clarified by personal discussion.

All nine registrars/SHOs answered promptly and were available for subsequent discussion. Six of the nine had had some previous experience of full-time research before joining the training rotation. This ranged from a two month project in one case to three individuals with research degrees; two PhDs and one Dr Med from Germany. Most (seven) had done the post as their fourth or fifth on the scheme, apart from two who had taken it up as second or third post. All had obtained the preliminary part of the MRCPsych before starting the post; two obtained the membership during it.

Most (seven) expressed positive feelings overall about their experience of the post although two felt dissatisfied, largely through not having completed projects in the time available. The responses were broken down according to whether the trainees had previous full-time research experience or not. We had expected that those with such experience would have made more of the post and this seems to have been the case. The numbers are too small to permit formal statistical analysis, but it would seem that those with previous research experience were more successful in completing MPhil degrees, publications and grant applications. This does not, however, seem to have deterred those without such experience from undertaking further research. All those who had taken up the post continued to carry out research; at the time of the study five were in full-time academic or research posts. Three of those were the three who had had no such experience prior to this posting.

Most comments on the post were very positive. The registrars felt it had given them a great opportunity to carry out a project. Some had difficulties in adapting to life as a full-time researcher. Particularly lack of structure was regarded as a disadvantage. One remarked that a six month period could be "too short to get into it". Another

commented that to have known about the posting some time in advance would have given more of a chance to prepare and make good use of it. Ways were suggested in which more structure could usefully be given to the post. These included a clearer stating of the aims of the posting, and attendance at a taught course in research methods.

## Comment

What conclusions can be drawn from such a small sample? Obviously the individuals who managed to obtain the six month post were motivated as they wrote a good research proposal while working full-time clinically. All except for one aim for academic posts in the future. Five are currently holding research posts, three are still on the rotation and one is working as a senior registrar while seeking funding for a research project. Although most six month projects were clinical in nature, two were basic sciences and one registrar has since obtained a fellowship in molecular genetics. Our questionnaire was not constructed to elicit why these individuals were attracted to research. Toone *et al* (1979) found that those more active in research are more likely to have a biological or behavioural model, whereas those adhering to an analytical model were less research minded. We do not know if this would apply to our sample.

There are benefits in receiving research training in a relatively well equipped teaching hospital as the Maudsley with its links to the Institute of Psychiatry. All trainees have made use of computing facilities and statistical advice available at the Institute. Two projects were done in conjunction with the MRC Unit for Social Psychiatry and two with the Psychiatric Genetics Section.

The six month post has enabled those with previous research experience to expand their knowledge and seek funding for major projects. Thus it has helped individuals with an established interest in full-time research. The setting with its wealth of experience in clinical research, basic sciences and statistics has helped in the training of workers with special interests. As all trainees retained some clinical commitment, often including night duties, their clinical training also continued.

More six month research posts can thus help overcome some of the major difficulties outlined by Kendell (1987) and should help to prevent his gloomy view of the future of psychiatric research in Britain from becoming a reality. We have little doubt that it encourages young doctors to pursue a research career.

What about the relevance of an intercalated six month post for SHO/registrars who do not aim for a full-time career in research? We believe that the three trainees with no previous research experience and the experience of other centres (Kendell, 1984; Davidson & Abou-Saleh, 1987; Burford, 1987) provide us with some hints.

Such individuals are likely to achieve less and be less satisfied in the short term. However, some will be caught by the 'research bug' as almost all in our sample. They would have benefited most from a taught course in research methodology and statistics as now offered at the Maudsley. Although supervision by an experienced researcher is crucial for all trainees carrying out research, it is even more so for those with only limited previous experience. The six month spend with a limited project will only give trainees an opportunity to collect sufficient data for an MPhil if combined with such supervision. As Kendell (1984) described, most candidates on the Edinburgh MPhil course who get to this stage complete their degree. All of them learnt a great deal about data analysis and research methodology.

Such knowledge is essential when reading the psychiatric literature (Shiwach & Murray, 1986). This experience in research will enhance the trainees' abilities as teachers and clinicians and will help them to set up clinical research projects at consultant level. Finally, we believe that a six month research post should be part of most rotations in teaching hospitals as it encourages entry into full time research and rounds up the training of future NHS consultants.

## Acknowledgements

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