Research opportunities for medical students: time flies when you’re having fun

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We would like to thank Dr Alamri for his interest in our recent article evaluating research opportunities available to medical students in New Zealand. We identified a range of formal and informal student research training opportunities, which Dr Alamri has classified as short-, medium- or long-term in duration. The amount of time dedicated to different research projects may vary considerably, reflecting the variety of research opportunities on offer to medical students in New Zealand. The duration of an undergraduate research activity generally reflects the degree of a student’s commitment to an academic career pathway, and it is unlikely that a student’s first research experience will be a long-term project such as an intercalated BMedSc(Hons) or a PhD. Most students will engage in undergraduate medical research in a step-wise progression from involvement in short and simple research projects (e.g., summer studentships and clinical audits) to longer and more complex projects (e.g., intercalated thesis-based degrees). However, Australasian medical students do not necessarily view this as a straightforward pathway, perhaps reflecting the lack of well-defined training pathways for clinical academics in these countries. The establishment of well-defined undergraduate and postgraduate training pathways for clinical academics may support students in New Zealand and Australia to pursue this career route.

We note with interest Dr Alamri’s correspondence with the Auckland Medical School regarding the intercalated MBChB/PhD programme. Based on one of the present authors’ personal experiences, The University of Auckland does not currently offer a formal intercalated MBChB/PhD pathway similar to Otago’s. For a medical student to enter a PhD programme without having a prior research-based degree (e.g., Master’s), or to “convert” from a BMedSc(Hons) to a PhD, a student would require dispensation from the Board of Graduate Studies, an option which has not previously been tested at The University of Auckland. We look forward to the establishment of a formalised MBChB/PhD pathway at The University of Auckland, similar to that currently offered at Otago and other overseas universities. Intercalated higher degree programmes have been shown to be very successful in developing clinical academics, though the uptake of these opportunities in New Zealand is very low. Furthermore, medical students’ attitudes towards and involvement in, and outcomes of the MBChB/PhD programme at The University of Otago have not been studied.

Multi-centre student-led collaborative research projects present a novel opportunity for students as a short-term extracurricular research activity. Students and trainees may each contribute a relatively small part to a larger study, helping with local participant recruitment and data collection. Collaborative studies have become very popular in the UK and Europe, and are now beginning to emerge in Australasia; the student and trainee-led IMAGINE study run by the EuroSurg Collaborative is a recent example of such an opportunity.

While the duration of a research project is an important factor to consider when evaluating opportunities available to students, there are numerous other factors influencing a student’s overall success. These include student motivation, the quality of the project itself, quality of supervision/mentorship, availability of financial support, protected time, and flexibility for family and work-life balance. If motivated students are identified, supported and provided with
structured opportunities to meaningfully engage with research during medical school, they will enjoy their time in academia, will engage in subsequent, longer-term scholarly and research activities and ideally will be retained in an academic training pathway.

The academic community should promote research as an important aspect of excellence in patient-centred care, aiming to move beyond the “CV-filler” or “tick-box” mentality held by some students. As research opportunities at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels continue to emerge and develop in New Zealand, it is important that these are incorporated into defined, flexible pathways for the training of clinical academics.4,5 If students and trainees are supported during their research experiences, they will be more likely to have positive experiences, and continue to make long-term contributions to academic medicine throughout their careers.

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Nil.

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