

of any one individual. A team approach is essential and favours larger schemes. The skill mix among tutors and academic staff should be the subject of regular review.

Some tutor competencies should be common to all tutors including trainer skills for the teaching of interviewing and mental state assessment, counselling and teaching. All tutors should be aware of their counselling role, and of the links between this role and the responsibilities and activities of the educational supervisor and career counsellor. The counselling brief at hospital level ranges from induction, through mid-term feed-back, exam preparation and feed-back, to career counselling. The content of counselling work, methods of counselling and the changing context of clinical practice all need to be understood and appreciated.

Deficiencies were recognised in tutor training particularly in relation to teaching and educational methods. The necessary local expertise for exam training, management training and research methods need to be kept under review and addressed as appropriate.

The following actions were agreed for the Northern Ireland Regional Training Scheme: further training should be provided for tutors on the teaching of interview skills and mental state assessments; steps must also be taken to provide access to teaching methods courses.

Reference

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Training matters

The research option: educators' attitudes

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An understanding of research methodology and design including the appropriate use of statistics is considered by the Royal College of Psychiatrists to be an essential part of the education of psychiatrists. The report of the working party for the review of the MRCPsych examination emphasises this by mentioning statistics and research methods as one of the major areas that will be examined as part of the sciences basic to psychiatry (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1985). They point out that over recent years there has been an increase in the number of questions devoted to this subject, and state that this trend should continue. Pre-membership psychiatric trainees are often encouraged to undertake or participate in research (Sims, 1988), but many commence projects which never come to fruition (Hollyman & Abou-Saleh, 1985); lack of adequate supervision seems to be the cause (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1991). The Royal College of Psychiatrists is unique among the Royal Colleges in that it enables candidates for the membership examination to be exempted from the essay paper by submitting a dissertation in advance based on a piece

of original research. This is known as the research option.

Few psychiatric trainees seem to be aware of the research option, and even fewer avail themselves of it. One explanation for this may be a failure of their educators to inculcate or encourage an interest in research in general, and more specifically in the research option. In order to understand more about why this should be the case and consider possible ways to improve the situation, a study was undertaken to survey the attitudes to, and knowledge of research and the research option among psychiatric educators.

The study

A questionnaire was sent to all Royal College Regional Advisers (21), all Examination Course Organisers (24), and half of the 260 Psychiatric Tutors (130). An explanatory letter was included, together with a stamped addressed envelope. Non returned questionnaires were followed up with further mailshots. The design of the questionnaire

TABLE
Responses to the questionnaire

	Tutors	Organisers	Advisers
Total surveyed	130	24	21
Total replies	108	18	19
Percent	83%	75%	90%
<i>The role of research</i>			
	(% agree)	(% agree)	(% agree)
Trainees should have a detailed knowledge of research design and methodology	81	83	68
Trainees should have a detailed knowledge of common statistics	82	83	74
Trainees should undertake original research prior to membership	62	78	89
<i>The research option</i>			
Aware the option existed	90	100	89
Aware it was retained for the new examination	80	100	89
Could advise when and how to register a project	36	73	84
Could advise on suitability of project	48	78	63
Could advise on likelihood of acceptance of dissertation	26	73	58
Competent to act as supervisor	50	89	74
Could supervise or direct trainee to competent supervisor	93	100	100
Know the length of the dissertation	24	22	37
Know when it should be submitted	22	28	32
Know which part of the examination the candidate is exempted from	61	67	74
Know what proportion of the marks this accounts for	21	33	32
Routinely discuss the option with trainees	12	17	11
Have been approached by trainees in the past year	10	6	0
Consider the option valuable	69	61	74
Would favour the suggested new option	37	39	63

was deliberately simple in order that it could be completed in a few minutes with yes/no answers. It was divided into two sections, the first asking the trainers about their views of the place of statistics, research methodology, and original research in pre-membership training, and the second asking specifically about their knowledge and encouragement of the research option. A final question solicited views of an alternative research option proposed by the Research Committee. The explanatory letter encouraged respondents to add comments in the space at the end of the questionnaire.

Findings

Responses were received from 19 of 21 Regional Advisers (90%), 18 of 24 Course Organisers (75%),

and 108 of 130 Psychiatric Tutors (83%). Abbreviated versions of the questions asked, and the proportions of each group of respondents answering in the affirmative are shown in the Table. On 21 of the total of 145 replies there were written comments. Two respondents struck out the word "detailed" from the first two questions, then answered in the affirmative; these were counted as "no" answers for reasons discussed below.

Comment

The total response rate of 83% is exceptionally good for a postal questionnaire and probably reflects the decision to make the questionnaire simple and quick to complete. The first two questions were deliberately loaded to force a difficult choice for the respondents.

The inclusion of the word “detailed” was decided following discussion with colleagues, as it was felt that the omission of the word or use of a weaker word would result in a universal positive response, and reveal nothing of how strongly the respondents felt about these points. A clear majority of all three groups of psychiatric educators felt that a detailed knowledge of research methods and design, and of commonly used statistical techniques should be expected from psychiatric trainees. Royal College Advisers were less convinced of this than other two groups, but paradoxically they were more convinced of the benefit of undertaking original research at pre-membership level. Almost all the educators were aware that there was a research option, and that this option has been retained following the reorganisation of the MRCPsych examination. The psychiatric tutors, who would be expected to have most day to day contact with trainees, did not appear to have confidence in their ability to advise trainees about the research option, and rarely discussed it with them. This may have reflected the fact that they were not aware of the detailed requirements for the option. The Course Organisers and College advisers were more confident of their ability to give advice, and were a little more aware of the requirements for the option. Course Organisers and College Advisers were more likely to be academics, whereas most psychiatric tutors were clinicians: this may have been a reason why the tutors felt less able to give advice about research. Perhaps for the same reasons, the Course Organisers and College Advisers were more likely to feel capable of acting as a supervisor for the research option. It was satisfying to see that almost all educators could either supervise the research themselves or direct a trainee to someone who could, but one wonders about the isolation of the few who felt unable to do either.

Among the written comments, a number of educators expressed reservations about the emphasis that was placed on research at an early stage in a trainee’s career. Several others felt that exemption from the essay paper in the Membership Examination was insufficient reward to encourage candidates to undertake a great deal of extra work. Several

tutors commented that they knew nothing about the research option prior to receiving the questionnaire, but intended to familiarise themselves with the details. Some commented that the details I had asked could not be immediately recalled, but that they could easily be looked up.

In view of the fact that most educators are in favour of trainees undertaking original research projects it seems surprising that the research option is so seldom considered. There are several possible explanations for this. It could be that trainers have expressed their wishes about the standards they would ideally like to set, but under the day to day pressures of teaching clinical skills there is little room for supervising research. Another explanation may be that educators themselves are aware of a personal lack of knowledge in this area, resulting in a lack of confidence in their own abilities together with a wish to see this remedied in their trainees. It could be that trainers do not recognise the benefit of undertaking research as a means of learning about it.

I think that it is a great shame that so many trainees are unaware of the research option, or fail to register their projects for it. We are all aware of the importance of research, both to our careers and for our professional self esteem. Early exposure to achievement and success in this field can only be to the benefit of trainees. Trainees should consider registering for the research option, and trainers should familiarise themselves with the requirements and discuss them with their trainees.

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