

# Improving undergraduate medical student involvement in research

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## Dear editor

We read with great interest the article by Abulaban et al<sup>1</sup> on the opinions about research held by medical students in Saudi Arabia. As final-year medical students at one of the best-ranked universities for its research influence, we would like to offer our views and experiences in regard to participating in research.

It is evident that medical students in both Saudi Arabia and the UK are aware of the usefulness of participating in research, with 90% of students in Abulaban et al's study and 86% of students from a UK medical school recognizing its importance.<sup>1,2</sup> A common motivation for participating in research among medical students is the beneficial impact it can have on career progression in both Saudi Arabia and the UK.<sup>1-3</sup> Despite this drive, less than half of students get involved with research. This is demonstrated in a study similar to that of Abulaban et al, conducted in seven medical schools in the UK where only 49% of students had participated in research.<sup>1,3</sup>

In the UK, the importance of research is reflected in the Foundation Programme junior doctor applications where additional points are awarded for publications. Despite this, only 59% of medical students across seven medical schools were aware that publishing research was an awarded criterion.<sup>3</sup>

A gap has been shown in research opportunities for medical students despite there being motivation to get involved. Thus, it is important that solutions are identified. Research has shown that some of the reasons why students do not participate are time constraints and lack of opportunities and encouragement from supervisors.<sup>2,3</sup> We agree with the solutions presented by Abulaban et al and would like to propose some further points.

One barrier raised by UK medical students was the lack of supervisor support; this can be resolved by appointing dedicated supervisors for medical students to utilize throughout their degree. As medical students, we are often unaware of the range of research opportunities available to us. This could be improved by creating a platform to display current research opportunities, for example a forum on the university website. Finally, the issue of time constraints can be improved by making medical students aware of research and its importance earlier on in their education. A study has shown that 71% of students who publish research are either final-year medical students or those doing an intercalated degree.<sup>3</sup> Personally, we were unaware of the importance of research until later on in our medical education and during our intercalated degrees. Although most UK medical schools incorporate a student-selected component into the curriculum, we have not found it sufficient enough for conducting publishable

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research. One way of overcoming this issue is by formally incorporating research-focused time into the curriculum. This initiative has already been implemented in some European countries, such as the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup>

Research is a key element in the progression of medicine; thus, to permit future doctors to engage in research, we must provide the medical students of today with the correct skills, experiences and opportunities.

## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this communication.

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## Authors' reply

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## Dear editor

The letter by Yussuf et al is very instructive and thoughtful. It carries special significance as it is written by people directly involved, namely, medical students.

Their comments confirm a number of the findings in our paper and highlight similar hurdles and potential solutions that would apply to both Saudi Arabia and the UK and elsewhere.

The additional proposed solutions in their letter are excellent and worth implementing. In our university (King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences), completing a research project is obligatory for all medical students before they can be allowed to graduate.

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