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Radiation oncology trainee research requirements – re-thinking our intention and approach

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Dear editor,

Research is fundamental in the advancement of radiation oncology practice to improve patient care. For the purpose of the academic development of our future radiation oncologists, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologist (RANZCR) Faculty of Radiation Oncology (FRO) has in 2011 mandated trainees to have a research work published, or at least 'accepted to peer review' by one of the five specified radiation oncology journals, before they are eligible to sit Phase-2 examinations (1).

A recent paper by Roos et al suggested the FRO research requirements to be one of the most stringent trainee research requirements, compared to other Australasian specialty training colleges (2). This was followed-up with a survey among radiation oncology trainees and junior fellows (3). There are some positive points to note from the survey (4) – nearly all submitted projects met the required standard, and close to three-quarters were eventually published. However, some of the glaringly negative feedback reported in the survey should not be taken lightly – 1-in-5 trainees were dissatisfied/ very dissatisfied with the research requirements, and 1-in-3 trainees were of the opinion that the research requirements as an eligibility criteria to sit for Phase-2 examinations is unreasonable/ very unreasonable (3).

The intention of the FRO in mandating the research requirements was undoubtedly to foster research interest among trainees early on in their career – this is laudable and should be supported by the radiation oncology community. However, will the additional pressure of publishing and preparing for examinations concurrently create a negative experience for trainees, such that it deters trainees from future research endeavours? In our zest to achieve an objective measure (i.e. peer-reviewed publication) as yardstick of the supposedly rigorous research training within our specialty, have we overlooked the teaching of clinical research process itself? Are we sending the message that even before qualifying as a radiation oncologist, it is possible to address and answer a research question with benefits for clinical practice, when experience clinical researchers know that quality research requires a protocol, ethics approval, recruitment of patients, time for maturation of results and so on before the manuscript can be written – in other words, time and funding. Is this realistic for all trainees?

It is timely for us to reflect on how to best improve radiation oncology research training. Rather than forcing our trainees to publish probably the only paper in their entire radiation career disgruntledly just to meet the eligibility criteria to sit for examinations, we need to create a conducive research environment emphasising quality supervision and mentorship that helps them navigate the challenges of research. Ultimately, we hope to cultivate a passion for research such that more trainees proactively seek out a career in radiation oncology research. One commendable key step in this direction has been the establishment of the Clinician-Scientist Pathway, which integrates a doctoral research degree with clinical training.

We believe that research should remain a critical component in radiation oncology training. However, we may need to re-evaluate our approach in guiding our next generation trainees in the pursuit of a research career, and providing them with the necessary skills to spearhead the future of radiation oncology research!

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