

How much time do you need?

You cannot start soon enough with finding your field of interest, research idea and finding a mentor willing to help you. The following timeline is suggested for a registrar following a four-year training program. Your final year will be spent preparing for your final clinical examinations so the research project must be completed within the first three years. There are a number of obstacles that you might not be aware of before you start your research project. Examples of time consuming obstacles include: discussing your research idea with colleagues, arranging meetings with other Departments, writing your research proposal, presenting your proposal to the Departmental research committee, submission of your protocol to the Human Research Ethics Committee and getting permission from the hospital authorities. All these have to be successfully concluded before you can even start collecting data.

To be able to complete your research project within three years we would suggest the following time-line:



First year of training: The year of planning

1. Decide what area of clinical care you are interested in.
2. Discuss with colleagues/consultants various research ideas.
3. Approach a mentor to help you with your research.
4. Review the literature.
5. Develop a research question.
6. Consult the necessary expert(s) like the biostatistician.
7. Write your research proposal, including case report forms (CRF) and consent forms.
8. Present your research proposal to the Departmental research committee.
9. Submit your protocol to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).
10. Simultaneously request permission from the hospital management to do the study.
11. Develop your database.
12. And that is just the beginning.

TIP: Although it takes time to settle into Department as a registrar you will have to start the process within 3-6 months otherwise you will not complete the necessary formalities.

Second year of training: The year of collecting data

1. Do a pilot study to test the case report forms (CRF) etc.
2. Collect the necessary data.
3. Transcribe the data onto a database.
4. Clean the database of all mistakes, missing data or duplicate data.
5. Sharpen your analysis plan.
6. Analyse the data with your mentor and biostatistician's help.
7. Plan to present the results of your research at a local, national or international scientific meeting.

Third year: The year of writing and communicating

1. Write your provisional report/thesis/article: draft 1.
2. Re-read and re-write your draft a number of times.
3. Submit your draft to your mentor.
4. Carefully address your mentor's suggestions and re-write your draft.
5. Revise your draft (once again).
6. Submit your thesis for marking.
7. Reply to the examiners' comments.
8. Present to department, at conference, to hospital authorities etc.
9. Final submission for degree.
10. Submit article for publication.
11. Go out and celebrate.

TIP: The writing seems to be the easiest part of this process but unless you are gifted this is very hard and frustrating work as most of us are not naturally scientific writers.

TIP: If there are courses on planning, implementing research, writing proposals, research ethics, writing an article etc. - attend them. We all need all the help we can get.

The Postgraduate and International Office at Stellenbosch University have a number of useful tools to help postgraduate students. The one useful tool is an electronic timeline for staff and postgraduate students called "Ontrack"
<http://www0.sun.ac.za/ontrack/login.php>

► See appendix 1 on how to log on to "Ontrack"

► See Appendix 1 for examples of how to develop a timeline.

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