

## *How do you find a good mentor?*

You need to find a good mentor if you are going to successfully complete your research project within the timeframe required. Many senior researchers still have mentors to help guide them through the maze of developing research questions, designing the correct study, finding the funding and writing the resulting article(s). All researchers understand the value of brainstorming a research idea and developing the precise research question. You are not on your own and all researchers will be willing to help you.

### **What makes a good mentor?**

A good mentor is someone who is already an established researcher but more importantly someone who is enthusiastic in helping junior colleagues with their research. A good mentor is willing to spend time with junior colleagues to help them develop their present research project and a future career in research and academic medicine.



Senior researchers are always looking for young colleagues who are interested in an academic career especially those enthusiastic about clinical research.

### **Should you have more than one mentor?**

Senior mentors, while willing to aid junior colleagues, often have many commitments and it may be difficult to meet with senior mentors on a frequent basis. Getting an appointment can be quite a challenge.

Working with an additional junior mentor can be very fruitful. The junior mentors are normally more accessible, are able to spend more time developing the necessary research tools (forms, applications, CRF's, data analysis) and help writing the resulting article(s). Junior mentors will also be more than willing to help you, as your research will also help to promote their research/academic careers.

Having more than one mentor is helpful as this exposes you to different aspects of critical thinking and ways of completing your research project. Different mentors can open different doors of opportunity during your research project as well as after you have qualified. Occasionally, mentors may have differing approaches (all of which may be valid), which can confuse you as you are developing your ideas.

**TIP:** Do not have too many (>2) mentors. This can be very confusing.

## What is the function of a mentor?

The functions of a mentor would include:

1. Guiding you to develop critical thinking.
2. Helping you to develop a precise research question.
3. Critically reviewing your research proposal.
4. Guiding you through the research maze to enable a successful submission to the ethics committee.
5. Aiding you in the following additional aspects:
  - Critically reviewing the literature.
  - Developing the case report form (CRF).
  - Facilitating access to a biostatistician, data management expert and others as needed.
  - Representing your interests within the Department to ensure that the Departmental resources are available which could include financial, secretarial, data capturing etc.
  - Accompanying you to discuss the involvement of other Departments/institutions.
  - Helping with analysis of your data.
  - Reading your thesis/article/poster critically and making constructive comments.
  - Assisting you in selecting a journal to submit your article to.
  - Guiding you through the article submission process.
  - Helping you respond to reviewers' comments.
6. A good mentor will find ways to sponsor your attendance to a scientific meeting to present your findings.
7. Most importantly a good mentor will build your research capacity and career.

## How do you find a good mentor?

Finding a mentor can be very difficult, daunting and challenging. Here are a few suggestions on how to find a good mentor:

1. Word of mouth. Fellow registrars and young researchers will be able to tell you from their experiences who are good mentors that enabled them to complete their research.
2. If you have a good research idea discuss it widely with many of the consultants and you will find some of the enthusiastic consultants. Approach those showing enthusiasm for your project.
3. You could also do a PubMed search on the research your potential mentor has published to see if your research interests overlap.
4. Approach an established research group and enquire if there is a member willing to act as a mentor.

## How do you approach a potential mentor?

Approaching a mentor can be quite intimidating as you might feel the mentor is so knowledgeable and your knowledge is quite inadequate. It is important to remember that all mentors also had to learn how to do research.

1. One of the least intimidating methods of approaching a senior mentor is to send the mentor a brief e-mail explaining who you are and a brief explanation of your research idea. You would request an appointment to discuss your ideas with her/him. This gives the mentor an opportunity to think about your research idea and involve other researchers/consultants if the mentor thinks they will be beneficial to your research.
2. Another approach is to carefully listen to consultants during ward rounds and at clinical and academic meetings. Consultants often mention research ideas that you might be interested in and where they are looking for junior researchers to help with the research. Approach them immediately and express your interest to be part of the research project.
3. Finally approach colleagues working in established research groups and enquire which projects they are busy with and whether there is a subsection of their research you could be involved in.

## How do you find a junior mentor?

When meeting with your mentor raise the issue of a junior mentor. Senior mentors often have junior consultants or senior registrars who they would like to involve. For the junior mentor it is also an opportunity to develop capacity. Senior mentors will often just be too glad to be able to involve a junior colleague.

## How do you get the most out of your interaction with a mentor?

1. Always prepare prior to a meeting. It is a great help to the mentor if you send a short summary of your research idea. Make a short agenda of what you want to discuss.
2. A mentor cannot resist helping an enthusiastic junior researcher/registrar who is making progress with her/his research. It is important to show progress (even if it is a little) especially when you are doing a difficult (time consuming) clinical rotation.
3. After each meeting with your mentor, send her/him a short summary of the main points you have discussed and action points of your decisions during your meeting. Remember, mentors have many other things to think about and have good but short memories – refresh the memory with an agenda for next meeting and summary/action points of previous meeting.
4. Make a schedule of regular appointments to discuss your research.
5. If a glitch arises in the course of your research or you experience personal

problems, contact your mentor immediately. She/he understands that research is unlike clinical medicine and does not have the same predictable course. (See Introduction 4: Roadmap of research)

6. Stay focussed on your research. Mentors, like everyone else, love winners. Once you have found a good mentor (s) you have accomplished a big step forward in completing your research project. Be sure you keep your mentor(s) informed all the way along the research path.

 **TIP:** A good mentor is not only essential for your research project but can help you with your career.

Gie, R., & Beyers, N. (2014). Getting started in clinical research: Guidance for junior researchers. Cape Town: Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University.