

Why is research important to you?

Of course the quick and obvious answer is that you need to complete a research study if you want to register with the HPCSA. But that is focusing only on the end product of research. Research can be defined as the systematic investigation of a topic in order to increase knowledge. Using this definition, there are two aspects of research namely (1) the process of systematic investigation and (2) the final product of creating knowledge. Therefore while you need the final product for registration, the process of doing research and developing a disciplined systematic way of critical thinking, is really the final long lasting advantage of doing clinical research and this process of developing critical thinking is part of your education as a registrar or junior researcher.

“Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire”. (W.B Yeats)
If this guide can kindle that fire of critical thinking in you – Hurray!

Critical thinking should not be viewed as a requirement solely for research, but it should become part of your clinical practice and patient management – you should always be asking questions about your patients and their clinical course. During your training you learn and have to remember many facts. There is a danger in overfilling one’s brain with information and not spending enough (or any) time on thinking about the information and facts. Critical thinking is not the collection of a bunch of facts, but involves the systematic thinking about a topic using the knowledge you already have from the available facts and then developing the ability to reason and figure out why some facts do not fit. Critical thinking is asking the “why” question and research is investigating the “why” question in a systematic way before making a decision or drawing a conclusion.

Critical thinking in research means that you have to know your field of interest (literature review) and then ask a question (research question) and collect the necessary information and compare your findings to the already existing knowledge (research results and analysis). Critical thinking in patient care follows the same discipline – know your field (know the clinical course of your patient), and then constantly and systematically ask the “why” question and compare to your experience (Why is this patient different from all the others that I have seen? Why does this patient not respond to the treatment?). If you use this research opportunity to develop critical thinking, then you will complete your research study, but more importantly, you will incorporate critical thinking into your day-to-day practice and management of patients, and if you keep on asking the “why” question, your research will benefit you for the rest of your career.

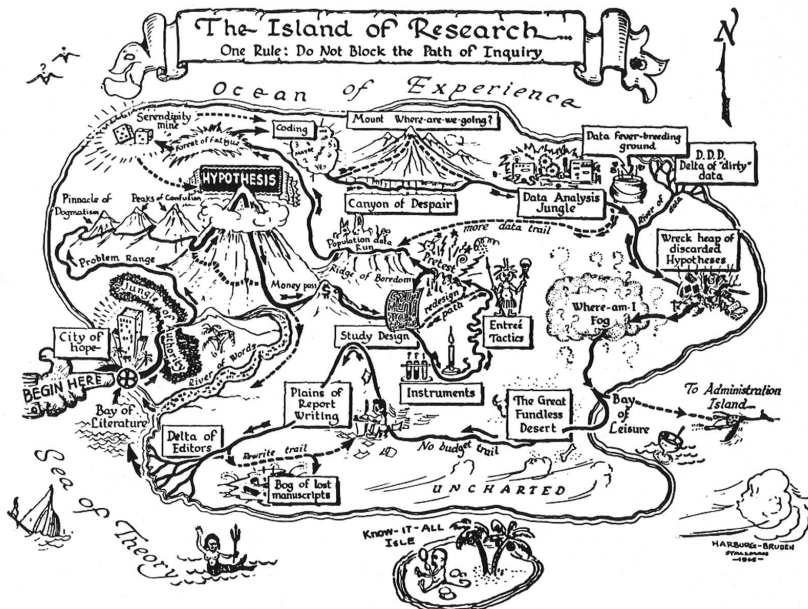
“Research has been called good business, a necessity, a gamble, a game. It is none of these – it’s a state of mind.” (Martin H Fisher)

To do good research you need to develop critical thinking and this must become part of your day-to-day life. This is not an easy adjustment and you need to be careful not to take your critical mind into your personal life!

You will experience many ups and also many downs during your research. Often senior researchers forget to talk to junior researchers about the miserable research days. However, during every research study there are days where one just wants to give up and feels that one is not going forward at all. It is quite normal to feel like this – but do not give up.

When you do get despondent, take a minute and look at this fun cartoon published with permission of Prof Ernest Harburg from Ann Arbor, Michigan University – see where in the Island of Research you are lost, then laugh a bit and get on with the work.

Remember even when you get lost on the lonely island of research, never block the Path of Inquiry.



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.