IDENTIFYING A RESEARCH TOPIC

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Research is designed to generate new knowledge and might involve testing a new treatment or regimen. Once an idea has been formed, or a question asked, it needs to be transformed into a hypothesis. It is helpful to approach surgeons who regularly publish articles and who have a special interest in the subject area being considered. As ideas are suggested, it is important to consider whether the question posed really matters. Spending time refining the question (hypothesis) is probably the most important part of the process. Choosing the wrong topic can lead to many wasted hours. Once a topic has been identified, it is also important not rush into the study . ated The worst possible outcome is to find at the end of a long arduous study that the research has already been performed or that the chosen methodology did not support investigation of the primary/secondary outcomes. The first port of call for information is the Internet (with assistance as needed from a medical librarian). Current arti - cles about the proposed research should be retrieved; review articles and meta-analyses can be particularly helpful. It is v ery important to learn how to do an accurate and e ffi cient search as early as possible. Collections of reviews are availab le – the Cochrane Collaboration brings together evidence-based medical information and is available in most libraries. Once informa tion on the subject has been obtained and the rele - vant literature identified, it is important that these are carefully - perused. It is not su ffi cient to just read the abstract! Further information is given in Table 13.1 . An excellent source of ideas where research is needed can come from reviewing high-quality national guidelines such as those produced by the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) on a particular area of interest, many of whic h include a section beneath the headline guidance being made on ‘recommendations for research’. This section is populated after the currently available evidence for an inter - vention or treatment has been reviewed by the expert team and found lacking. Designing a research project to cover one or more of these agreed areas can be easily justified to both funders and clinicians alike. - Finally , there is an increased number of Priority Setting Partnerships across all aspects of surgery , including those for - mally undertaken by the James Lind Alliance and by others - run by surgical associations and their patient–partner gr oups. These partnerships consist of patients, carers, healthcare pro - - fessionals and organisations or charities representing people with the particular condition. They focus on identifying and prioritising research gaps or important specific questions for which additional new research is needed to answer them. Again, creating research projects in these areas is likely to be well received; sometimes such studies are also prioritised for funding support. It is also helpful to seek support from specific networks set up to support health research. In the UK, the National Insti tute for Health Resear ch (NIHR) runs the Research Design Service (RDS), which provides free and confidential advice on research design, writing funding applications and obtaining public engagement in research for all researc hers. There are also a number of training courses available in research meth odology and application.

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