

## POGP CONFERENCE 2017

# What research can I start on Monday morning?

**K. Crotty**

*Private Practice, London, UK*

---

### Abstract

All physiotherapists are researchers, even though some may not realize it. Whether we undertake a PubMed search after seeing an unusual case, google a drug that one of our patients has been prescribed that we have not heard of before, or discuss a case with a colleague, we are always looking for answers. All of this is research, even if it is conducted in an informal way: we all have questions, and we are all looking for answers. Some of us do research in a more formal context, and our investigations attempt to answer questions in order to produce evidence, rather than just find solutions for our own clinical practice. Although many of us may feel that this type of study is out of our reach, we can all formalize our day-to-day research practices to disseminate our findings. A simple audit can be helpful in ensuring that evidence is being used to support our practice. Writing up and presenting a report of service development may not only improve your own patient care, but inspire others to look at ways to enhance their own. A simple case study can be published online at the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy's Big Physio Survey. A literature review can be printed in the POGP journal, and help to answer a question that many of us have been asking. We can all do this. Others will go a step further and begin more-formalized work with the help of a university. Whatever shape your research takes, the cornerstones that I have found to be useful are as follows: do not be intimidated; your question should be something that you are truly curious about; keep things simple; discuss your work with anyone who will listen; do not rush; and plan how you will disseminate your findings from the start. Research is exciting, so this is the challenge: get cracking on Monday morning.

*Keywords:* audit, case report, literature review, research, service evaluation.

### Introduction

This informal presentation was scheduled by the POGP Executive Committee with the aim of encouraging us all to think about research and how we can contribute to it. Research can be intimidating, but the hope was that Conference delegates would strengthen their understanding of just how accessible it is. Research does not have to be complicated, and is not just for “boffins”. Research means identifying a question, and working to try to find an answer to it. It is as simple as that. All physiotherapists are researchers because we continually come across questions during our clinical reasoning that we seek to answer.

*Correspondence:* Kay Crotty PhD MCSP, Clinical Lead, Physioblink Chartered Physiotherapists, 97 Pinner Road, Harrow, London HA1 4ET, UK (e-mail: [dr.kaycrotty@gmail.com](mailto:dr.kaycrotty@gmail.com)).

Indeed, the field of women's health has produced a wealth of research, as recognized by Dr Sarah Dean, Associate Professor of Psychology Applied to Rehabilitation and Health at the University of Exeter Medical School, Exeter, UK:

“Some of the work I have had the privilege to be part of is in pelvic floor muscle training for urinary incontinence. This area of work is a strong contender for the research leader in terms of exercise adherence [...]. There is a strong evidence base for the efficacy of [these] exercise interventions. They are now in the position to tackle the adherence issue [...].” (Dean 2017, p. 7)

Therefore, there is currently no need for us as a group to be self-effacing in terms of research output. Equally, we must not become complacent.

So, what could you do on Monday morning to develop your research skills? The answer to that question is, “Plenty!” However, although nothing will happen without advice, guidance and support, your starting point must be self-confidence, a belief that you can do this. I have heard physiotherapists say variations on the following so many times: “I am not clever enough and just don’t have that sort of brain”; “I couldn’t stand up on a platform and talk”; or “Why on earth would anyone put themselves through it?” My answer is that anyone who is eligible to be a chartered physiotherapist has a head for research, it is just a case of getting the right help.

### Initial steps and tips

The first step towards research is to develop an idea. You may already have one that you put aside a while ago. Now is the time to dust it down and rethink it. Alternatively, you can simply decide to scribble down clinical questions during the course of a couple of weeks to see what you come up with. It is best to formulate a question that you are truly curious about and want to answer. Research is generally easier to do with a self-propagated question than a prescribed one.

Now talk to anyone you can about your project. Ask your physiotherapy and surgical colleagues what they think about the idea: Is this a good one? Is it feasible? How would it work? What model does it fit? Would patients be interested in taking part? Can I/we do this in-house? Do I/we need collaborators?

The next step is to keep your planning simple. Try to get from A to Z in a straight line rather than embellishing things along the way. If you always keep returning to your research question, you will stay on track. It is very easy for a novice researcher to think, *While I am at it, I could just do this and perhaps add that...* Stay disciplined and keep things streamlined. If you happen to collect data during the course of your research that could be analysed to answer another question that has cropped up, that is fine, but leave this until after you have disseminated the answer to your primary question.

The fourth thing to remember is not to rush. Research is something that needs to be carefully thought through. Extend whatever time frame you think you can complete it in by 30–50%. For example, you may find that you have worked through several versions of your design, any questionnaire that you use and the relevant consent forms, but this is normal. Try not to get

frustrated, and just accept it. Even going through the ethics process, if necessary, can be enjoyable since each stage is a new experience.

Finally, decide where you want to disseminate your findings at the beginning. Will it be in-house to colleagues, in this journal or at a conference? Always keep your method of dissemination as your goal: this is the exciting bit, and you should look forward to it.

### Types of research that you could start thinking about on Monday morning

Literature reviews underpin every piece of research, and are research projects in themselves, if only for the purposes of your continuing professional development. Gathering papers on the same topic and critically evaluating this material provides valuable answers about: how reliable the individual pieces of research are (e.g. can the piece of research be repeated with the same results?); and how valid (i.e. true) the findings are. Literature reviews should never be underestimated, and are an excellent starting point for research. It is not enough for us to read an abstract and a conclusion: what goes on in the middle of a paper is crucial; and learning to critically evaluate research is enormously empowering. Golash-Boza (2015) has published an excellent article on the Wiley blog that describes the six steps that are involved in conducting a literature review.

We all have access to excellent databases such as PubMed, CINAHL, PEDro and the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. If you are unsure how to use these, ask a colleague who is involved in research, or go to your nearest medical library and request help. Ordering papers can be expensive, but the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) library and the British Library (BL) hold vast collections, including many that your hospital library may not keep. You can preregister with the BL online to see if it subscribes to the journal that you need. Collate your reference list and then send it to the BL. You should then be able to book a space in one of its rooms and access those papers.

The key to reviewing a paper is understanding the statistics. This can be intimidating at the beginning, but there are excellent online resources that explain tests individually. Trisha Greenhalgh’s (2014) invaluable book is a great start. You do not have to be a professional statistician; a rudimentary working knowledge is enough.

Clinical audits are ways of ensuring that evidence-based practice is being followed in order

to: maintain and improve quality; agree on best practice; review outcomes; examine issues such as consent; and identify gaps in training and resources. Service evaluations tend to study the entirety of a service in an effort to improve patient experience and value for money, for example. When planning either of these kinds of research, you should look for models that have been used elsewhere. Professional groups on Facebook are an excellent way to reach out to colleagues who may have an existing model that you could replicate. Alternatively, read the 2017 POGP Annual Conference poster abstracts that are published in this edition of the journal (pp. 71–76), and contact the authors with your questions.

Case studies are an excellent way to disseminate unexpected findings or successful interventions. For example, these can answer questions such as: Is this an unusual presentation? Is this outcome unusual? Is this a challenging case? Is this problem not widely reported in the literature? The CSP have an excellent forum that allows you to publish your case study ([www.bighphysiosurvey.com](http://www.bighphysiosurvey.com)), or you could submit it to this journal.

If you are thinking about conducting clinical research, there are several starting points. Ask yourself: Who do you know who has done research locally, knows the ropes and would meet to chat. Do you need ethics approval? Generally, this is only required for an intervention that does not fall under the definition of normal treatment. However, it is best to check on this, so find out who to contact at your local ethics committee. Consider consent issues as well: it may be that your ethics committee would like to approve your patient information and consent sheets. Think about where you can get help; for example, a university with a physiotherapy faculty. Which is your nearest? Why not go there and have a chat? You may be able to register for an MPhil, which is based solely on original research rather than being a modular programme. Finally, think about registering for a conference, preferably an international one. The contacts you will make will be invaluable.

Finally, find out what funding is available. The CSP have a fund of £200 000 per annum that can award up to £25 000 to start-up researchers (CSP 2017). On a more modest basis, POGP administer the Dame Josephine Barnes Bursary (POGP 2017). This fund makes £3000 per year available in awards up to a maximum of £500. The money can be used for any part of your research, including help with the costs involved in travelling

to an international conference. You can also find other sources of funding at RESEARCHconnect, “a user-friendly database containing global funding opportunities for research undertaken by UK institutions” (Idox 2017). The content of this resource covers “a broad range of funders and disciplines as well as international and national programmes” (Idox 2017).

### Summary for Monday morning

If this presentation has inspired you, why not start your research on Monday morning? Think about your research question and who you might talk to about it. Perhaps order a copy of Greenhalgh’s (2014) book. Start a preliminary literature search. Find out what resources, funding, libraries, universities and research committees are available to you. You will find numerous pathways leading you to support and guidance. Good luck and enjoy!

### References

- Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) (2017) *Research Funding*. [WWW document.] URL <http://www.csp.org.uk/professional-union/research/research-funding>
- Dean S. (2017) Adherence to therapeutic exercise – how do we help our patients adhere to physiotherapy? *In Touch* **158** (Spring), 4–9.
- Golash-Boza T. (2015) *Writing a Literature Review: Six Steps to Get You from Start to Finish*. [WWW document.] URL <https://hub.wiley.com/community/exchanges/discover/blog/2015/07/02/writing-a-literature-review-six-steps-to-get-you-from-start-to-finish>
- Greenhalgh T. (2014) *How to Read a Paper: The Basics of Evidence-Based Medicine*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ.
- Idox (2017) *RESEARCHconnect*. [WWW document.] URL <http://www.idoxgroup.com/funding-solutions/professional-funding-tools/researchconnect.html>
- Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP) (2017) *POGP Bursaries and Awards*. [WWW document.] URL <http://pogp.csp.org.uk/pogp-bursaries-awards>

*Kay Crotty started her career in the musculoskeletal arena, and after 15 years, began to diversify into the management of pelvic floor dysfunction. She completed the University of East London Postgraduate Certificate in Continence in 2002. In 2014, Kay was awarded a doctorate by the University of Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire, UK, for her seminal work investigating differing cues for a single pelvic floor muscle contraction in women. She continues to run an independent physiotherapy practice in Harrow, and also teaches and acts as an adviser to industry. Kay is the POGP’s current research officer.*