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Taking qualitative research to the next level

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On a daily basis, health professionals engage in interviewing and observation. They do this while eliciting a medical history, inviting patients to share their stories, and when observing patients' outlooks and behaviours during a consultation. The same holds true for clinical teachers, who may want to ask their students to explicate their learning goals, explain their clinical reasoning or think about the kind of professional that they aspire to become. Many clinicians will also be familiar with different kinds of small-group interaction, for instance during morning rounds and clinical case discussions. Furthermore, they may have experience with morbidity and mortality rounds, in which participants typically try to gather all relevant information about a situation in an attempt to improve clinical care and prevent future errors. It could

therefore be considered rather surprising that many clinical teachers seem under-confident when it comes to qualitative research, e.g. in the scientific use of their long-practised interview and observational skills, and experience with structured and analytical thinking when analysing patient cases, that have been well developed in the clinical environment.

Although some clinicians may still think of qualitative research as unscientific and anecdotal, straightforward and easy,¹ or at least as lacking practical value,² we contend that answering questions of 'why' and 'how' has much to offer to the domain of health professions education. In their 2016 *The Clinical Teacher's Toolbox* article on qualitative research, Tai and Ajjawi argued that qualitative research in particular can be helpful for arriving at a nuanced

understanding of educational phenomena. It can achieve this by exploring complex social and systemic interactions, and contextual or sociocultural forces that influence the experiences of teachers and trainees in the real-world clinical environment.³ The authors provided a concise guide for clinical teachers to become better acquainted with some of the basics of qualitative research, working through the following stages: philosophical stance (including ontology and epistemology), methodology, sampling and sample size, data collection, data analysis, reporting of findings and issues of quality.

The Clinical Teacher has now decided to run a series of methodology papers focusing mainly on qualitative research. The aim is to support clinical teachers who would like to move their inquiry forwards by learning

more about the writing of a good research question, the role of theory in doing research, novel approaches to collecting and analysing qualitative data, and opportunities for using qualitative research to change practice. Those papers will be written by members of the European Center of Excellence in Qualitative Inquiry and Study In Training and Education (EXQUISITE), which is a group of researchers with interests in qualitative research and different backgrounds and expertise, from different countries in north-west Europe, but with one single mission: taking qualitative research to the next level.

In the next issues of *The Clinical Teacher* we will explore the following topics:

- [how to write a good research question;](#)
- [how to use theory to understand practice;](#)
- [how to make use of different types of data;](#)
- [how to conduct research interviews in different ways;](#)
- [how to analyse qualitative data in different ways;](#)
- [and how to use qualitative research to change practice.](#)

Each of these topics will be addressed in separate articles, offering ample opportunity to

share practical tips and frameworks that we have found useful. As these papers will be fairly short and primarily intended to get people started, we will not be able to provide all the information needed to become an expert in qualitative research. Therefore, each publication will also include a list of resources for further reading.

In this edition of *The Clinical Teacher*, we start with a contribution about how to write a good research question. This includes reflections on how to make a research question relevant, original and rigorous, e.g. aligned with the theoretical framework and methods used for data collection and analysis. We will continue with articles exploring different approaches to study design, data collection and data analysis, from different research traditions and methodologies, originating from different scientific disciplines, including the social sciences, humanities and engineering. Our intention is to provide practical advice for clinical teachers who may have had little research training to date, to ensure that their evaluation and research projects have the best possible chance of success and the greatest impact.

It has been more than 10 years since our sister publication *Medical Education* launched a series called 'Making

sense of qualitative research'.¹ A few years ago, the Qualitative Collaborative, a North-American group of researchers, published a Qualitative 'Ripout' series in the *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*.⁴ More recently, *Perspectives on Medical Education* introduced a 'Qualitative Space' intended to explore novel approaches to performing qualitative research.⁵ With our 2018 series in *The Clinical Teacher*, we intend to build on what our colleagues have done in the past, by explicitly supporting novice researchers within clinical education, particularly those undertaking their first qualitative study, in line with our mission: taking qualitative research to the next level.

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