

Digesting journals

Does reading medical journals sound boring and geeky? **Tiago Villaneuva** and **Balaji Ravichandran** explain why they think starting to read medical journals while you are at medical school is invaluable

As medical students, you might well be familiar with the scenario where colleagues discuss a recent paper they read in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *BMJ*, or *Lancet* with their hospital consultants. Medical journals are a way for doctors to keep abreast of the most recent and relevant developments in their field. This is essential for long term medical practice, as medicine is a constantly changing field. The first line treatment for an infectious disease yesterday might well be contraindicated today, and any textbook will be out of date by a couple of years when a new edition appears.

Journals are an important way of disseminating relevant medical information to clinicians and researchers alike—from recent case reports to potentially dangerous drug interactions. Critical appraisal of research articles will help to develop the most valuable skills used in everyday medical practice.

However, the already overburdened medical student will not find the idea of reading weekly journals appealing, even if it is part of the learning requirements at undergraduate level. But contrary to what many of you might think, “giving medical students their own weekly copies of [medical] journals and having them present articles for discussion proved to be a huge success, as shown by increased journal reading, rates of subscription, and interest.”¹

So, why should you start reading journals now, at undergraduate level, rather than when you finish medical school? Well, for the simple reason that practice makes perfect. By starting early, you stand to gain a good reading habit, which is perhaps the hardest thing to achieve. Admittedly, students need to go through a long process of becoming acquainted and familiar with medical journals and realising their potential for personal and professional development or even leisure.

It would help to get rid of any negative preconceptions about medical journals by starting with a journal article that you are interested in. Indeed, it is likely that a newly qualified doctor with habits ingrained at medical school will find reading medical journals not only second nature, but a captivating and a pleasurable thing to do.

For reasons outlined above, regular reading stimulates and sharpens one’s judgment of a paper. Passive absorption of any medical information could prove disastrous. Instead, reading journals should be a dynamic interactive process of questioning what is written, reassessing your knowledge, raising new questions, and perhaps even dismissing the conclusions of the authors and submitting your own opinion in the form of correspondence.

Reading medical journals will also make medical students aware of the importance of sustained research (basic science or clinico-epidemiological) in medicine. It must be remembered, however, that every clinician is also a researcher, as each patient presents a potential research project, the outcome being improvement in the patient’s condition. Understanding the implications of basic and clinical research is indispensable in medical practice today.

Finally, it is worth remembering that medical journals convey information, information that is power, and power in the noblest sense of the word: power to change things and to influence attitudes, behaviours, and decisions. And, most importantly, power to help your fellow human beings.

Getting started

Here are a few tips to help you get started.

- Begin simply, and do not worry about understanding everything that you read. Always have a medical dictionary with you, and when in doubt, do not hesitate to ask someone you trust.
- Start with student medical journals (see box online) to get a feel for reading journals, and then progress to general medical journals. Preferably, read review articles before you go on to read research papers.
- It might be helpful to read “How to read a paper” by Trisha Greenhalgh (at <http://bmj.bmjournals.com/collections/read.htm>) or JAMA’s “User Guides to the Medical Literature” (at www.shf.ac.uk/scharr/ir/userg.html) before you start reading research articles.
- Try reading general science journals and general medical journals in the corresponding years of your medical education. Not only are both indispen-



sable, but they may be helpful if you’re planning a career in research.

- Personal taste and preferences will come in due course, as well as a sense of usefulness and enjoyment, which ideally come hand in hand.

Helpful medical journals

The box gives a list of helpful medical journals, which is by no means exhaustive. The journals have been chosen for their usefulness and readability and are mainly published in English. Many good journals are also available in other languages, and some of the main English language general medical journals have editions in other languages.

Most, if not all, journals have an online website, though not always with free access. The subscription prices for many of these journals are quite high, and you may not be able to afford access to the contents. If you do not have the required journal available through your library, and the online content is not available under open access, you can find the email address of the corresponding author (usually provided in the abstract or available on PubMed) and ask them for a reprint. Most authors will send the full text promptly, especially if it is an article that was published recently.

The full text of the journals is also accessible through the World Health Organization’s Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI) for economically disadvantaged nations.

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Competing interests: TV is a former editor of *studentBMJ* Portugal and *studentBMJ*. BR runs World Medical Forum at <http://health.groups.yahoo.com/groups/World-Medical-Forum/>

1 Kristinsson A. Journal reading in an undergraduate curriculum. (Correspondence). *N Engl J Med* 1994;330:1762.



A list of journals to try is on studentbmj.com.