

It is Time to Demystify Research and Publishing in Africa's Undergraduate Pharmacy Education

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Dear Editor,

In Nigeria, like most African countries, Academic pharmacy is the least appealing area of practice for most graduates⁽¹⁾. Apart from being known to be the least lucrative area of practice in terms of remuneration, many aspects of this career path seem to be shrouded in so much mystery. A vital aspect of an academic pharmacy career which many students are not privy to is research and publishing.

While there are various exposures to and simulations of most areas of pharmacy practice in undergraduate pharmacy education, none exists for a career path in academic pharmacy. Although it is widely known that academic pharmacy is the least appealing career path for many students, ⁽¹⁾ no effort is being made to make it an attractive option for students as the lecturers are not very inviting. Academic pharmacy in Nigeria comprises teaching and research components in university settings and purely research in few available research institutes. One may argue that the final year project is enough exposure to research at the undergraduate level, and typically it is expected that graduands interested in research should pursue a post-graduate degree to learn more about research. However, the low levels of pharmacist graduates who come back for postgraduate degrees and perhaps, more importantly, pursue a career in research point to the ineffectiveness of this limited exposure to foster research interest. Also, in most cases, the students are not given the freedom to explore and pursue their research interests and are usually mandated to do the

final year project in a particular area, with a designated supervisor, and of course on a designated topic assigned by the supervisor. This makes the project research more like a didactic learning experience and the students graduate acquiring little or no research skills.

Although research is not complete until it is published, ⁽²⁾ many students complete their research projects with little or no idea of the possibility of publishing their research. On rare occasions when some students ask their supervisors of the possibility of publication, a few supervisors would include their names, usually without their involvement in the writing and peer review process. To fully engage and foster undergraduate research, the students should be involved in the peer review and publication experiences.

There are a few lecturers who appreciate and encourage research among undergraduate pharmacy students, however, as pointed out by Jungck and colleagues "... many mentors of undergraduates involved in research may be reticent in promoting their students' efforts because they are intimidated or embarrassed by their own modest publication records."⁽²⁾ This reason, in our opinion, is a major deterrent to promoting undergraduate research and publishing, especially in this setting where lack of funding for research limits the extent of research undertaken by the lecturers. With many competing needs on a paltry and often irregular salary, research is at the bottom of the priority list for many academic pharmacists in the region. Since research is most often self-funded, lecturers publish just the number of papers

required for their next promotion. This lack of funding for research may also be a limitation for students interested in research.

In our experience, however, the students interested in research are usually very willing to self-fund research like their senior colleagues. Besides, a lot of global funding opportunities abound for undergraduate students interested in research, and the pharmacy schools should make efforts to avail students of such information.

The rare achievement of a recent pharmacy graduate from the University of Ibadan in Nigeria who successfully published more than 50 papers in reputable leading journals before graduation,⁽³⁾ lends credence to the fact that undergraduate students can be full participants in knowledge creation processes, including publishing. When lecturers invite undergraduates to do research as full participants in the knowledge creation process, including publishing, it is collaborative and they stand to gain too. Other disciplines have taken steps towards encouraging undergraduate research and publishing. Pharmacy schools in the region can learn from sister faculties of medicine and nursing that have journals dedicated to publishing undergraduate research to encourage undergraduate research and publishing. Although many pharmacy conferences have provisions for students, these are mostly Masters and PhD students, and the few undergraduates who participate are rarely presenting or corresponding authors.

It is time to end the archaic hierarchical model of postponing the right to publish until after postgraduate study. To increase the number of academic pharmacists in the region, then conscious efforts must be made to make research attractive and to nurture interests in research, early enough in pharmacy education.

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