

LETTER TO EDITOR

COVID-19 and Research Projects for Postgraduate Clinical Training

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Dear Editor,

COVID-19 pandemic had caused significant impacts on various aspects of higher education including in the field of medical education. Beside disruption in teaching and learning, assessment limitation, reduced supervision and de-skill involving various subspecialties, we would like to highlight regarding the issue of dissertation and research activities in postgraduate clinical training in one of Malaysian university.

Previous studies showed more than 60% of clinical specialist trainees were facing interruptions or reduction in their research activities, hence causing problems to complete the required dissertations. Among causes identified were reduced patients attendance, closure of research laboratories, suspension of clinical trials, suspension of elective procedures and lack of time (1,2). In Malaysia, majority of clinical postgraduate programmes requires conducting a small research project and submitting final dissertation as their prerequisite for graduation, apart from exit theory and clinical examination. As with other educational activities, COVID-19 pandemic and Movement Control Order (MCO) imposed by the government since March 2020 had increased challenges in research components of specialist training.

We did a short survey among 32 postgraduate students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Doctor of Obstetrics & Gynaecology (DrOG) programme currently in year 2 to year 4 and found out 18 of them (56.3%) were unable to run their research project in time. When being

asked: "Why the research projects were interrupted": the answers were basically related to reduction in patients attendance due to the pandemic and MCO. Thematic analysis showed 13 responses emphasizing on the reduced research samples due to reduction in patients attendance to clinic and admission for elective procedures. Two respondents claimed they had reduced time as being deployed to take care of COVID-19 wards. Another reason is near-total closure of certain subspecialty services, such as assisted reproductive (3), causing researches involving the field were disrupted. Due to MCO and workplace restrictions with administrative staffs attendance being reduced, new research projects submitted for ethical clearance had taken longer time to be approved. In the peak of the pandemic, interruptions also occurred due to many staffs and patients either infected with COVID-19 or being quarantined.

To overcome these problems, faculties and trainees need to be dynamic, rapid and more flexible. Among measures can be taken is to allow retrospective analysis or audit studies as research projects for clinical postgraduate dissertation. Systematic reviews and meta-analysis are good alternative to clinical trials and will be less likely to be affected by this pandemic. For gynaecology as one of surgical fields, changing from surgical-related to non-procedural researches may be an option (4). Another good solution is to conduct research project on emergency or obstetrical conditions related to COVID-19 such as looking into COVID-19 in pregnancy or antenatal issues related to the infection.

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