Providing support for early career researchers

The International Collaboration of Early Career Researchers website www.theicecream.org

In recent decades there has been significant growth in the number of physiotherapists electing to undertake research training. While entry-level physiotherapy education is focused on developing competent clinicians who can assess and treat a wide range of conditions, most programs now include components of research methodology. Moreover, the incorporation of evidence-based practice within the profession has produced a need for physiotherapists to be able to interpret and apply clinical research findings. For physiotherapists, this foundation in research has enabled flexible career paths which can involve both clinical practice and research.

There is an increasing recognition of the impact physiotherapists are having in the research field. The achievements of physiotherapy researchers can be observed through the receipt of research funding at the highest level (Hodges 2009) and the advances that have been made to clinical practice through the trials and reviews now indexed by the Physiotherapy Evidence Database, PEDro. However, despite adequate supervision early career physiotherapy researchers, including PhD students, often find little in the way of peer support during their research training.

The International Collaboration of Early Career Researchers (The ICECReam) website is a blog with a social media presence designed to support early career health care researchers. This collaboration was started by a small group of physiotherapists from Australia, Brazil, and Canada who completed their PhD degrees in Sydney. The developers of the website recognised that when starting a career in research students often find themselves in situations isolated from peers with whom they can share common experiences and challenges. The blog provides, through the personal experience of the writers, a medium for reflection on both the difficulties they face and the advantages of an academic or research career.

The content on the blog is based around the regular posting of short, easily digested articles written by early career researchers. These range from experiences with specific research tasks – such as calculating sample size, or data collection – to more general skills such as time management and goal setting. Also reported are relevant articles on contemporary information about issues such as research funding, impact factors, and developing a career in academia. Much has been reported about the difficulties faced by early career researchers and the blog is an honest but usually informal and optimistic forum for these frustrations, which allows the site and collaboration to adopt a tone of familiarity to the readers. As most of the writers have a background in clinical practice and are currently engaged in clinical research, they often touch on the relationship (or disconnect) between researchers and clinicians. This has direct relevance to physiotherapists who have difficulty finding relevant information about the internet. It also serves those wanting more information about a specific aspect of the research process.

Members of the collaboration have a regular presence at international and Australian conferences – including the Australian Physiotherapy Association conference – and post both highlights and critical reviews of conference presentations and programs. An important innovation has been the presentation of workshop sessions at conferences by ICECReam members for early career researchers to network and discuss issues and improvements to the website. This has increased the international recognition and use of the website, with visitors and guest posts from all parts of the world, as well as serving to strengthen the support and collaboration among early career researchers in Australia.

Accompanying the blog is a social media page through Facebook, which reports when new content is posted on the site but also shares other general interest and newsworthy items related to clinical research. Like many social media pages there are links to humorous quasi-scientific content such as cartoons and pictures, but the Facebook page also allows the sharing of more newsworthy articles from pain research to academic misconduct. There is growing recognition of the power and importance of social media, in terms of information sharing, building connections and also with regard to shaping attitudes and opinions. Much of the interaction with the site comes through this platform and as such the Facebook page forms an important part of the collaboration.

The physiotherapy profession takes pride in its firm grounding in scientific research. In order to maintain this link researchers need support and resources to develop their careers and make meaningful contributions to the evidence base. The ICECReam initiative provides a platform for the current generation of researchers and those interested in becoming involved in research to connect, develop, and learn. The tone is conversational, at times humorous, and always collaborative – offering a welcoming environment for those wishing to engage.

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Disclosure
The author of this review is part of the International Collaboration of Early Career Researchers and has contributed regular articles to The ICECReam website.

References
PEDro www.pedro.org.au