

Academic Pressure and Research Ethics at the Crossroads

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Healthcare professionals become research scientists to improve the health and well-being of humankind. Often stemming from clinical observations (Moody, Vera, Blanks, & Visscher, 1989), the process of writing a proposal to investigate the problem, obtaining funding, conducting the study, and disseminating findings takes considerably longer than the expectations of productivity in grant funding and publishing manuscripts for faculty on a tenure track in academia. Application back into practice, which is the goal of research, and evaluation of improving patient care and outcomes take even longer.

Academics in Research

The specific requirements for promotion and tenure vary by institution and are often vague. In general, the expectation is to publish three to five manuscripts per year (preferably data-based and as first author) and to obtain continuous grant funding. The gold standard is federal funding and, in particular, being awarded the coveted R01-level grant. Then, researchers must repeat this process in addition to teaching, committee responsibilities, and service. Often, the trajectory for meeting these goals is slower than the expectations. Getting a manuscript through the most frequent sce-

nario of submission, review, revision, resubmission, acceptance, and publication can take as long as a year and sometimes longer. Similarly, with grant applications, the months roll by from initial submission to funding to actually conducting the study. By the time study data are collected and analyzed, submitting the study results for publication can be several years from the start of the initial grant application.

For those not meeting the annual goals, however, is there a point where reaching the bar overshadows the nascent goal of improving health and well-being? For some, it does; in extreme cases, ethics are breached. Scientific misconduct is defined as fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism (Gross, 2015). Spanning more than 2,000 years in recorded history, scientific misconduct is not unique to current research practices (Gross, 2015). Academic pressure may play a factor, but how much it contributes is unknown.

At times, the big picture may seem daunting. However, many roads lead to academic success. Figure 1 is a schematic that can help guide those who are feeling less successful. Note the emphasis on mentorship. Having strong mentors who have succeeded before and peer mentors can keep researchers focused as they succeed.